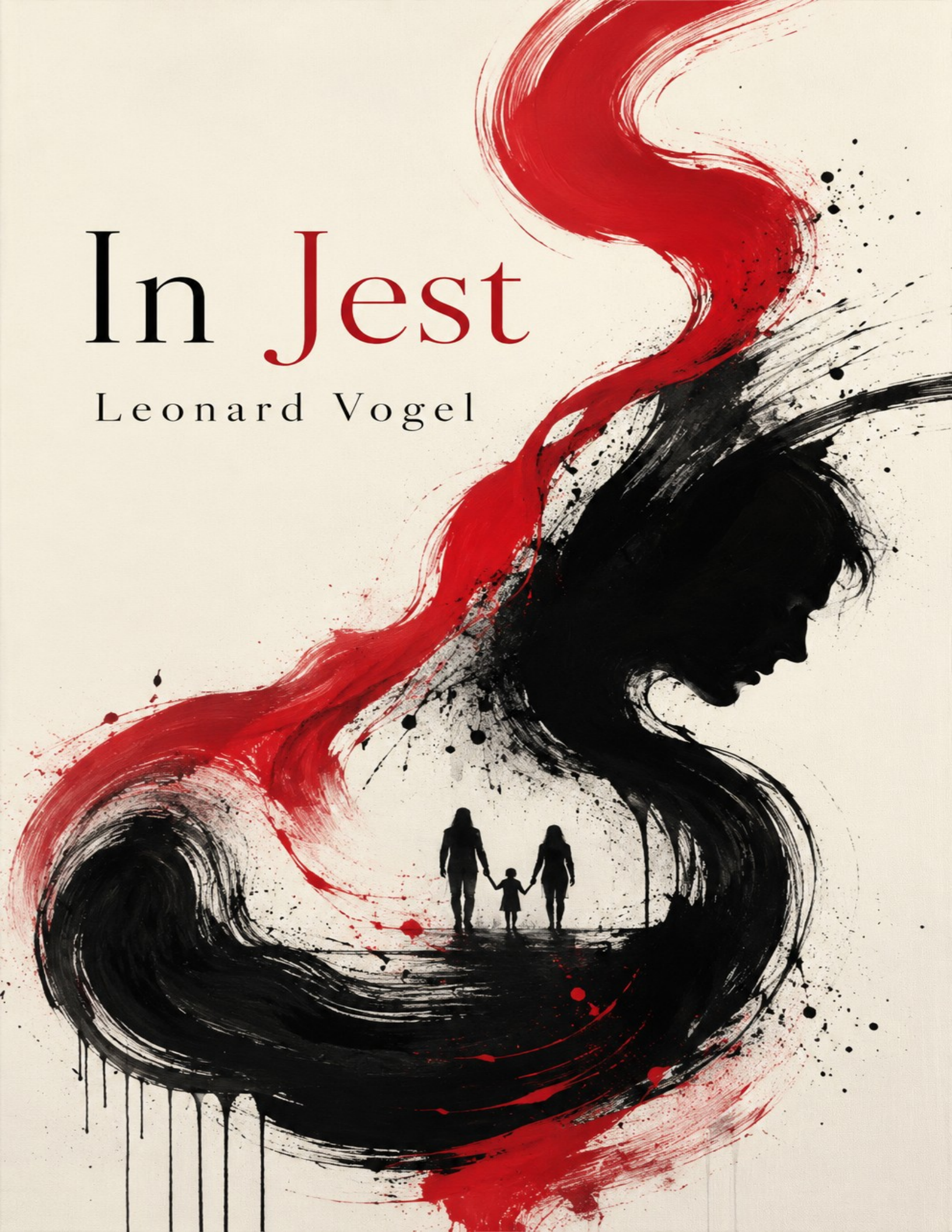
In Jest

Leonard Vogel



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Prologue

I always thought that evil came with a bang. That it wore high boots, spoke a foreign language, and at least had a clear, recognizable silhouette, like in war movies. It seemed to me that the moment when the world breaks down would be impossible to miss. Sirens would wail. The sky would darken.

But now, sitting in the kitchen and looking at my cooling tea, I realize I was wrong. Evil doesn't need special effects. It doesn't need marches and torchlight processions — those are just props for history textbooks, to make it easier for us to separate "then" from "now." A real disaster comes quietly. It comes in slippers. It sounds like a notification in a parent chat. It hides in a good joke that we all laugh at over dinner.

My daughter is sixteen. She sits across from me, scrolling through her phone, the bluish glow of the screen making her face porcelain, almost transparent. Five minutes ago, she told me a story. A typical school story about a girl from another class. She told it casually, while spreading butter on her bread. She used one word. A funny word. A vivid word.

And I said nothing.

At that moment, in the silence of our cozy kitchen, smelling of vanilla and laundry detergent, I suddenly heard an echo. It didn't come from the hallway, but from somewhere deep in time. I heard the clank of a mechanism that had been set in motion thousands of

times before us. In ancient Rome, in medieval cities, in 1930s Germany, in Waco, Texas, in Rwanda.

This mechanism always works the same way. It doesn't require us to be killers. It asks only one thing: to agree with the label. To accept the label. To smile at the joke.

I look at my daughter and see her smiling at something on the screen. She doesn't know that the process has already begun. She thinks that this is just life. That there is "us" — normal, understandable, familiar. And there is "them" — strange, funny, unfamiliar.

I am not an expert, a historian, or a judge. I am just a mother who suddenly lost the right to be naive. I see how the air around a girl I don't even know, begins to thicken. I see how words build a cage, the bars of which are stronger than steel because they are made of public opinion.

This book is an attempt to capture the moment when a word ceases to be just a sound and becomes a sentence. I want to understand how we, good, kind people, become accomplices in the disappearance of other people. And is it possible to stop this flywheel once it has been set in motion, or are we left only to watch history repeat its bloody lesson while we drink tea and laugh at a funny meme?

It all starts as a joke. But it always ends the same way.

Chapter 1: The Word

The kitchen at nine in the evening is a special place. It is a time when the daytime buzz subsides, giving way to sounds that you don't usually notice: the hum of the refrigerator, the noise of a car passing outside the window, the quiet tapping of fingers on a smartphone screen. My daughter, Katya, is sitting across from me. She is sixteen. At this age, children become like aliens who seem to have learned human language, but have their own incomprehensible intonations. She drinks tea, tucking one leg under her, her face illuminated by the cold bluish glow of the screen.

We talk about trivial things. About the new algebra teacher who speaks too quietly. About how the sneakers she bought a month ago are already "out of style." It's a safe, cozy conversation, a kind of ritual that confirms that the world is standing still, the walls are strong, and we are a normal family.

"Oh, by the way," she says, without looking up from the screen. Her voice sounds light, almost cheerful. "Maya from the parallel class was teased again today. You know, the weird one."

I take a sip of tea. The tea is hot, burning my tongue.

"Why weird?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

"Well, Mom, you know. She's that... cultist."

The word falls on the kitchen table like a dead bird. Heavy, out of place amid the smell of vanilla cookies and cozy twilight. Katya pronounces it so simply, as if she were saying "blonde" or "straight-A

student." There is no hatred in her intonation, only slight disgust and mockery. That's how you talk about someone who's wearing a ridiculous hat.

I freeze. Something inside me tightens — an old, irrational fear that shouldn't exist in our comfortable lives. I look at my daughter. She's smiling at something on her phone. She doesn't understand. For her, it's just a word. A meme. A label.

"A cultist?" I ask again. "Where did you get that?"

"Everyone says so," she shrugs. "Her parents have some kind of club. Yoga, meditation, something like that. They say they do strange things there. They don't eat meat, they sing something. In short, a cult."

"In short, a cult." How quickly this mechanism works. One click, and a person is no longer a person. They are a category. They are an object.

I put down my cup. I suddenly feel cold. I'm not an expert on religions, I'm not a sociologist. I'm just a woman who has read a lot and observed even more. And now, looking at my daughter, I don't see a teenager repeating other people's words. I see history speaking through her, through her young, clear voice. An ancient, terrible history that never ends.

A term that I learned a few years ago when I came across some OSCE conference materials comes to mind. "The Roman formula." It sounds like the name of an ancient theorem or architectural style, but in fact it is a drawing of a meat grinder. Professor Massimo Introvigne, an Italian sociologist, described this mechanism with

frightening accuracy. He didn't invent it — he simply dusted off something that humanity has been practicing for centuries.

The formula is simple, like all things that are ingenious and deadly. It consists of three stages that always follow in the same order. You can't jump straight to violence. First, you have to prepare the ground. The first stage is intolerance. The second is discrimination. The third is persecution.

It all starts with words. In ancient Rome, where the name of this formula originated, the first victims were the early Christians. They were not killed immediately. First, they had to *be named*. The Roman elite, educated and civilized people, created an image of the enemy. They said that Christians were not just a different faith. No, that would have been too complicated. They put it more simply: these people were "enemies of the human race." They attributed absurd, monstrous things to them: cannibalism, incest, conspiracy against the Empire.

Why? To create distance. To turn a neighbor, a baker, a soldier into a "stranger."

I look at Katya. She doesn't know about Nero, about Diocletian, about how people were fed to lions to the cheers of the crowd. She's just sending her friend a funny picture. But the mechanism is the same. Absolutely the same.

"Katya," I say quietly. "Do you know what that word means?"

"Which one? Sect?" She finally looks up at me. There is sincere confusion in her eyes. "Well, it's when people's brains are washed. When they're zombies."

"Have you seen how Maya's brain was washed? Have you talked to her?"

"Oh, Mom, don't start," she rolls her eyes. "No one talks to her. She's *crazy*."

"No one talks to her." There it is. Isolation. The word "sect" is an amazing linguistic reversal. Originally, in Latin, *secta* simply meant "school," "teaching," "path." From the verb *sequor* — to follow. A philosophical school could be a sect. A group of doctors adhering to a certain method of treatment was a sect. A political party was a sect. The word carried no negative connotations. It simply meant a group of people united by a common idea or leader.

But language is a weapon. And over time, the meaning changed. Today, in our democratic, tolerant society, this word has become a label. A stigma. In ancient Greece, a stigma was a mark burned or carved into the body of a slave, criminal, or traitor. So that everyone could see: this person is not like us. They are corrupt. They are dangerous. You cannot deal with them. Today, we don't need red-hot iron. We have words.

I try to imagine this girl, Maya. I saw her a couple of times at school. Quiet, with long braids, always carrying a heavy backpack. An ordinary child. Did her parents open a sports club? Yoga? In our neighborhood, it's considered prestigious. Healthy lifestyle, mindfulness — all these buzzwords. But as soon as someone, just one person, uttered the word "cult," reality became distorted.

Yoga turned into "strange rituals." Vegetarianism turned into "fanaticism." Lack of interest in school gossip turned into "zombification."

This is the magic of stigmatization. A label works like a crooked mirror. It completely nullifies a person's identity. It doesn't matter that Maya may be a talented artist, loves cats, or helps her grandmother. All of that is erased. Only one thing remains: "cult member." The label is perceived by the mind as a ready-made conclusion. The brain is lazy; it doesn't want to figure things out. Why analyze, why get to know a person, if there is already a clear definition? "Sectarian" is a diagnosis that requires no proof. It is a sentence handed down without trial.

"Who said it first?" I ask. Katya thinks for a second.

"I don't know. I think one of the guys wrote it in the chat. He posted a photo of her father in some white clothes at a training session. And he captioned it: 'Beware, the sect is attacking'. Everyone laughed.

"Everyone laughed." Laughter. This is where the real nightmare begins. Not with threats, not with blows. With a joke. Laughter legitimizes cruelty. If it's funny, then it's not serious. If we laugh at them, then we are superior. Laughter draws a line: we are here, normal, cheerful, and they are there — ridiculous, pathetic, dangerous.

I remember Bertil Persson's article "The Fight Against Sects." He wrote about how in the 11th-17th centuries, the word "sect" was used in a broader and often neutral sense — to refer to a doctrine, movement, or group of followers — but in the 20th century, and especially now, this concept has become an instrument of social surgery. Cut off. Remove. Throw away.

I am not afraid for Maya. More precisely, not only for her. I am afraid for my daughter. She is sitting in front of me, my beloved, kind girl, who cried when her hamster died, who helps old ladies cross the street. And now, without batting an eye, she is participating in the destruction of a person. She is not doing anything wrong, from the point of view of school rules. She does not hit or call her names to her face. She just supports the "general background." She laughs.

"Mom, why are you so upset?" Katya puts down her phone. "It's just a joke. No one's bothering her. It's just... well, it's better not to mess with her. You never know."

"You never know what?" I ask quietly.

"Well... what if it's contagious?" She giggles, but a shadow of real, primal fear flashes in her eyes.

Fear. That's the fuel for the "Roman formula." First, an image of an enemy with demonic traits is created. In Rome, they said that Christians drank the blood of babies. In the Middle Ages, they said that witches kissed the devil. In Nazi Germany, they said that Jews were to blame for all the troubles of the German people. Today they say: "They will take away our apartments," "They are brainwashing us," "They are destroying our psyche." The essence of the accusations changes, but the structure remains the same. Dehumanization. Deprivation of human status.

I look out the dark window. Behind the glass, the city lives its life. Thousands of windows, thousands of kitchens. And in how many of them is this word being uttered right now? In how many chat rooms is this "joke" flying around? The statistics I've seen in studies are ruthless. In closed communities — schools, the army, offices — a

negative label is attached instantly. It only takes a few days for a person to go from being "one of us" to being an "outcast." There is practically no way back. It is impossible to justify oneself, because any attempts at justification are perceived as confirmation of "otherness." "Look, she's aggressive!" they will say if Maya tries to defend herself. "Look, she's withdrawn!" they will say if she falls silent and withdraws into herself. The trap has snapped shut.

"Katya," I try to speak calmly, but my voice betrays me, trembling. "Have you seen this photo? The one with your father dressed in white?"

"Yes."

"What's so scary about it?"

"Well... I don't know. It's unusual. He’s not like everyone else."

"Not like everyone else." The greatest crime in the teenage world. And the perfect target for those who control public opinion. I think about how we live in an age where information spreads at the speed of light, but medieval instincts haven't gone anywhere. We're still afraid of the dark and those who live on the outskirts of the village. Only now the village is global, and the torches and pitchforks are digital.

Massimo Introvigne warned: "The Roman formula works because it is invisible to most people. People think they are simply expressing their opinion. That they are defending their values. They do not see that they are part of an algorithm. The first stage is intolerance. It has already been passed. In my daughter's class, in this elite, good school, the seed has already been sown. Maya is no longer Maya. She is a "sectarian." The second stage is discrimination.

It is starting right now. "No one talks to her." "It's better not to get involved with her." Isolation. Boycott. Creating a vacuum.

And what will be the third stage? Persecution? In history, this has always ended in bloodshed. Always. Without exception. When society agrees that a certain group of people are "second-class citizens," "dangerous elements," "a cancerous tumor," violence becomes only a matter of time and technique. But now, in my kitchen, everything is quiet. No blood. Just tea and conversation.

"Okay, Mom, I'm going to bed," Katya gets up and stretches. "I have a chemistry test tomorrow." She kisses me on the cheek. Warm, familiar, smelling of shampoo.

"Good night," I say.

She leaves, her bare feet slapping against the parquet floor. I am left alone. The silence in the apartment changes. Now there is tension in it. I look at my phone screen. It is black, glossy, silent. Somewhere out there, deep in the digital networks, the word already lives. It pulsates, accumulates likes, comments, emojis. It gains strength.

I think about Maya's parents. They are probably drinking tea right now too. Or discussing plans for the weekend. They don't know that the verdict has already been passed. That their life, their business, their peace of mind are already at stake. Not by the court, not by the police, but by a dozen teenagers who got bored. And by us. Adults, who remained silent. Evil does not come with thunder and lightning. It comes with a quiet laugh: "Look how strange he is."

I get up to clear the cups. My hands make the usual movements — water, sponge, foam. But my thoughts are far away. I try to catch

the moment when it was possible to stop everything. Five minutes ago? Yesterday? Or is this mechanism, launched thousands of years ago in Rome, impossible to stop? Maybe it's built into our nature, like the ability to breathe? The need to find an enemy in order to feel like "one of us."

My daughter's phone is still lying on the table. The screen lights up with a new notification. I don't want to look, but my gaze falls on the glowing rectangle. A message from the school chat. A short video. The preview shows a girl walking down the school corridor. Filmed from behind, surreptitiously. And a caption in cheerful, bright letters, with a bunch of laughing emojis: *"Caution! Contaminated zone!"*

I look at these emojis. Yellow, round, baring their teeth in a smile. I think I hear a heavy, rusty mechanism starting to work somewhere far away, but inexorably approaching. The gears have meshed. The flywheel has made its first turn. The joke is no longer a joke. The hunt has begun.

Chapter 2: The Label

The next morning began with fog. It was thick, whitish, hiding the outlines of familiar objects, as if someone had erased the city with an eraser overnight and forgotten to redraw it. I was driving Katya to school, and the windshield wipers rhythmically swept away the moisture, revealing the gray asphalt for a second, only to let it disappear again immediately.

Katya was silent, glued to her phone. A typical morning for a teenager. But for me, the world had changed. Yesterday's word, uttered at dinner, had not gone away. It hung in the air, invisible but palpable, like the smell of gas.

When we pulled up to the school gates, I saw her. Maya. That girl. She was getting out of her mom's car — a silver Crossover, just like half the parents in our class had. She was wearing a plain beige jacket, a backpack with a funny avocado keychain dangling from her shoulder. She adjusted her hat, smiled at her mom, and walked to the entrance.

I caught myself looking at her differently. Against my will, my gaze searched for signs of "otherness" in her. Was her skirt too long? Was her gaze too strange? Why wasn't she looking at her phone like everyone else? I pulled myself together. It was a delusion. The girl was completely normal. But the word "sectarian," uttered yesterday, was already working like a filter on Instagram, imposing a distorting mask on reality. I realized that the mechanism had been triggered

not only in the school chat, but also in my own head. And that scared me the most.

When I got home, I didn't start working. I poured myself some coffee, opened my laptop, and did what any modern person faced with something they don't understand does: I opened a search engine. I needed to understand what we were dealing with. Where did this word come from? Why does it sound like a sentence? And why, for heaven's sake, have yoga classes and vegetarianism suddenly become a threat to society?

There were already thirty new messages in the parents' chat. I opened the conversation. *"Have you heard about the club on Lenin Street? They say it's not just yoga there." "Someone sent me a link. It's crazy. It's a totalitarian cult." "How awful. Where are the police?" "We need to warn our children not to take anything from them. What if it’s drugs or hypnosis?"*

The phrase "totalitarian cult" flashed through the conversation with frightening frequency. It looked solid, weighty, almost scientific. It smelled of government seals, criminal codes, and, strangely enough, barbed wire. I typed into the search bar: "What is a totalitarian sect?"

The internet dumped an avalanche of links on me. Forums, articles with screaming headlines, videos with disturbing music. But the more I read, the more perplexed I became. I was looking for a legal definition. I was looking for an article in the law. I was looking for clear criteria: if an organization does A, B, and C, it is a sect. But there was no law. There was no such term in the Civil Code, the Constitution, or the law "On Freedom of Conscience." None

whatsoever. There were religious associations. There were public organizations. There were commercial structures. "Totalitarian sects" did not exist in the legal field. It was a phantom.

So where did all these people in the chat room, all these journalists and "experts," get their knowledge about what it is? The thread led me to one name. It popped up everywhere. In every scathing article, in every story about "saving lost souls," in every court case against "the others." Alexander Dvorkin.

I started reading about him. A man with the appearance of a professor, with a bushy beard and a piercing gaze. He was called "the country's chief sectologist." It sounded almost like a job title. Chief physician, chief engineer, chief sectologist. It turned out that he was the one who systematically introduced this term into public discourse. This happened in the early 1990s. Until then, the Russian language did not have the phrase "totalitarian sect" as an established term. There were simply sects — in the historical, religious sense. There were cults. But Dvorkin performed a linguistic operation, stitching two concepts into one monster.

I thought about the word "totalitarian." It came to us from political science, which took shape in the 20th century and became particularly acute during the Cold War. It evokes instant, reflexive associations: Hitler, Stalin, concentration camps, gas chambers, night arrests, suppression of will, absolute evil. By attaching this epithet to the word "sect" (which already had a negative connotation in itself, but still remained within the bounds of religious disputes), Dvorkin achieved the effect of a perfect rhetorical weapon. "Totalitarian sect" is no longer about faith. It's about concentration camps. If you call a group of people a "new religious movement," you

invite discussion. You can argue about dogmas, about rituals. But if you call them a "totalitarian sect," the discussion is over. You don't argue with fascism. You destroy fascism.

I found his book. It was physically difficult to read. The text was so saturated with such a thick, concentrated certainty of the existence of an enemy that it made me feel uncomfortable. Here is a quote that made me freeze: *"Each of the totalitarian sects strives for power over the world and power over everyone — that's what a sect is."*

I reread it twice. Power over the world? Seriously? A group of people who get together on weekends to chant mantras or study the Bible, or, as in the case of Maya's parents, engage in physical practices — they seek power over the world? It sounded like the script of a cheap comic book about supervillains. But it was presented as expert opinion. As fact. There was a brilliant manipulation hidden in this phrase. It turned any group, even the smallest and most harmless, into a global threat. If they seek power over the world, then we have the right to defend ourselves by any means necessary. This means that the presumption of innocence is revoked.

I continued to dig. I needed to understand the criteria. How to distinguish a "totalitarian sect" from a regular interest group or church parish? And here I made the most surprising discovery. There were no clear criteria. Dvorkin and his followers created such vague formulations that anyone could be brought under them. "The presence of a leader"? Every school, every company, every party has one. "Internal discipline"? Every sports team has it. "Conviction of

being right"? It is characteristic of any religion and any political ideology.

Renowned religious scholar Igor Kanterov, a professor at Moscow State University, wrote about this directly: *"The vagueness of the terms 'totalitarian sect' and 'destructive cult' allows virtually any new religious movement, religious-philosophical teaching, cultural-educational or health institution to be classified as such."* This is not a scientific term. It is a label with a high degree of stickiness. Dvorkin himself admitted in an interview that he opposes the introduction of a legal definition of a sect. Why? His answer was extremely pragmatic: "We will lose these court cases." Of course. Because in court, facts are needed. You need evidence of crimes. And if there are no crimes, if people simply believe in something different or live differently, then there is no reason to judge them. The absence of the term in the law, however, creates a different situation. "Anyone, without fear of punishment, can call an organization that they consider a sect a sect," Dvorkin said.

That's it. That's the key to what was happening in our school chat room. Petya's mother from class 10B is not a lawyer. She did not conduct an investigation. She knows nothing about the activities of Maya's parents' club. But she has permission. She was given a free pass. She was told, "You can call them a cult, and nothing will happen to you. What's more, you'll be a good person. You'll be a vigilant citizen protecting children."

I looked at the screen, where a chat was open in the next tab. The hysteria was growing. *"And I heard they're taking possession of apartments." "Yes, yes, my friend's aunt was treated like that, true,*

it was different people, but the scheme is the same!" "The scheme is the same."

It's amazing how the human brain works. It doesn't need details. It needs a pattern. The label "cult" works like a zip file that already contains all the fears: apartment seizures, pedophilia, suicides, terrorism. It doesn't matter that a particular group has nothing to do with any of this. The label unpacks in the mind of the average person as a complete set of horrors.

I came across an article by researcher Sergei Ivanenko. He wrote that in the logic of anti-cult discourse, the primary goal of anti-cultists is not to help victims (who, in his estimation, often simply do not exist), but to stir up intolerance. To create an image of the enemy. "The anti-cult movement seeks to portray religious minorities, referred to as 'sects,' as socially dangerous, criminal entities against which the state and society must wage a decisive struggle."

I recalled the history of the term. In ancient Rome, the word *secta* was not a swear word. But when Christianity began to threaten the old order, the Roman elite used language as their first weapon. Christians were accused of "hatred of the human race." Not because they killed anyone, but because they did not participate in public holidays, did not make sacrifices to the emperor, and were closed off. Their "otherness" was coded as "danger." The same thing is happening today. Only instead of "enemies of the human race," we have a "totalitarian sect." Instead of Roman patricians, we have experts like Dvorkin. And instead of heralds at the forum, we have parent chats on WhatsApp.

I felt stuffy. I got up and opened the window. The noise of cars and the usual city hum came from the street. Somewhere out there, in this city, thousands of people are living their lives, unaware that they are already being targeted. I thought about Maya's parents. They probably put their hearts and souls into their club. They paid taxes, obtained licenses, and passed inspections by the fire department and sanitary authorities. They thought they lived in a state governed by the rule of law, where evidence was needed to bring charges. They did not know that they lived in a reality where words carry more weight than the law.

I went back to my computer and found another interesting point. Dvorkin's critics — scholars, lawyers, human rights activists — pointed out a paradox. Dvorkin's own organization, the Center for Religious Studies in the Name of the Holy Martyr Irenaeus of Lyons, according to some critics, possessed a number of characteristics that they attributed to the very "totalitarian sect" he was fighting against. Intolerance of criticism? Yes. A charismatic leader whose word is law? Yes. A black-and-white view of the world ("we are good, they are evil")? Yes. The use of manipulation and intimidation? That's how it was described. "Psychological terrorism" — that's what it was called in one publication. "Intimidating the population for the purpose of subsequent influence" — that's how it was explained.

It was, in essence, a business based on fear. Fear sells best. If you tell parents, "Your child may become interested in yoga, and that's okay," no one will pay attention. But if you say, "Your child is being hunted by a totalitarian sect that wants world domination and will turn them into a zombie," you are more likely to get budgets, airtime, influence, and power. Alexander Dvorkin has created a universal

bogeyman. Kirill Tovbin, a researcher, very accurately noted: "Dvorkin has created a universal bogeyman that can be used to eliminate virtually all critics of the modern power system... whether it be a religious or non-religious movement."

I imagined how this works in practice. Let's say you have a competitor. Or just an unpleasant neighbor. Or a group of people you don't like. You can't put them in jail — there's no reason to. But you can commission an article. Or just spread a rumor. "Beware, it's a cult." And that's it. You don't need to prove that they stole money. You don't need to prove that they killed someone. The word will do all the work for you. It will trigger society's immune response. People will start to shy away. Customers will leave. The landlord will terminate the lease ("just in case, so there are no problems"). The school principal will call the parents in for a talk.

I looked at the chat again. They were already discussing how to write a collective letter to the school principal. *"Let them check this family." "What if the girl is recruiting our children?" "I saw her giving someone cookies during recess. I would forbid everyone from taking them."*

Cookies. Ordinary cookies had turned into poisoned apples. I wanted to write to them. I wanted to shout, "Stop! You are adults, educated people! You are not in the Middle Ages! You read gossip and believe someone who invented a scary term!" I typed: *"Colleagues, let's not panic. We have no facts. Yoga is not a crime. And the term 'totalitarian sect' is not a legal concept at all, it's just a label."*

My finger hovered over the "Send" button. I imagined what would happen next. Silence. Then someone would write: *"Why are you defending them? Are you one of them too?"* And that question — "Are you one of them too?" — would sound like an accusation. In the coordinate system that Dvorkin had constructed and that these frightened mothers had so eagerly accepted, there was no room for neutrality. You are either a fighter against sects or an accomplice to sects. There is no third option. If I send this message, a shadow will fall on me. And on Katya. "Katya's mom defends sectarians." "She's kind of strange." "Maybe they go there too?"

A sticky, cold fear touched the back of my neck. I realized that I was afraid. Me, a grown woman who had just read dozens of articles about how it was all manipulation and lies, was afraid to write the truth in the school chat. Because I know the power of labels. They are contagious. It is transmitted through the air, through words, through glances, through "likes." I deleted the message. I didn't send anything.

Instead, I turned off my laptop. The screen went dark, reflecting my face — tired, confused. I understood the main thing. A label is not just a word. It is a command given to the public subconscious. And the scariest thing is that this command does not need facts. Intonation is enough. An authoritative opinion from an "expert" who says, "They want power over the world," is enough. And we believe it. Not because we are stupid. But because we are afraid. Dvorkin didn't sell us the truth. He sold us a simple way to cope with the complexity of the world. The world is complex, and there is much that is incomprehensible about it. But here, everything is simple: we are the

good guys. And they are a totalitarian sect, evil. Destroy evil, and there will be peace.

In the evening, when Katya came home from school, I looked at her closely.

"How are you?" I asked. "Fine," she said, throwing her backpack in the corner.

"Listen, Mom, our teacher said we'll have a class meeting tomorrow. Some guy is coming to talk about internet safety and these... destructive cults."

"Who's coming?" I gasped.

"I don't know. Some expert from the center. They said everyone has to be there."

I felt the floor slip away from under my feet. The system worked faster than I thought. In the morning — rumors in the chat. In the afternoon — a call to the principal (apparently, one of the active parents had already made an effort). And tomorrow — the "expert." I knew what he would say. I had already read the manuals. He wouldn't name names. He would speak in general terms about "zombification," about "detachment from the family," about "leaders hungry for power." But all the children would be looking at Maya. Every word he says would be a nail driven into the invisible wall around this girl.

"Are you going?" I asked.

"Well, yes, it replaces the chemistry class," Katya smiled. "At least we'll get some sleep."

She didn't understand. For her, it was just a boring lesson. She didn't see that tomorrow their class would be performing a ritual. A ritual of sacrifice, where the knife would be the word "cult" and the altar would be public opinion. I looked at the avocado keychain on my daughter's backpack. It was the same as Maya's. Two girls. Two lives. But one of them already had an invisible stamp on it. "Caution. Totalitarian."

I remembered a phrase from the article: *"The real target is the whole society, which is forced to watch the public execution*." Tomorrow the execution will officially begin. Under the guise of a lecture on safety. I wanted to tell my daughter, "Don't go" But what difference would that make? The label has already been stuck on. And the glue that holds it in place is mixed with the strongest human emotion — fear of the Other.

My phone was lying on the table. The screen lit up again. Someone in the chat had posted a photo of a flyer: "Beware! Cults are near you! Signs of danger." The flyer was bright, with red exclamation marks. I recognized the design. I had seen it on the website of the Irenaeus of Lyons Center. Now theory had become practice. The word had become flesh and was now preparing to devour its first victims in our quiet, cozy neighborhood.

Chapter 3: Mockery

Fear is an energy-consuming emotion. It is impossible to be afraid for long. The body tires from the release of adrenaline, from constant tension, from waiting for the threat. The psyche, like a smart fuse, looks for a way to release the pressure. And it finds the most ancient, most accessible, and most terrifyingly effective way. Laughter.

Three days passed after the "expert" visited the school. I didn't see him, but I felt his presence, like you can smell tobacco in a room where someone smoked an hour ago. Katya came back from that lecture not frightened, as I had feared. She came back cynical.

"Mom, it was so cringe," she said then. "This guy in a jacket that looked like he'd been sleeping in it for a week told us that if we listened to the wrong kind of music, we'd turn into zombies."

I breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed to me that the healthy skepticism of teenagers had worked as a kind of immunity. They didn't believe the horror stories. They laughed at the lecturer. But I was wrong about the vector. They laughed at the form of presentation, but they absorbed the essence. The lecturer didn't give them facts, he gave them a vocabulary. He legitimized certain words. And most importantly, he removed the taboo on discussing other people's lives. If a grown man on a podium says that "these people" are ridiculous, absurd puppets, then laughing at them is not a sin. It's normal.

Now, when I picked up my daughter from school, I saw how the atmosphere had changed. The wary silence that had hung around Maya in the early days was gone. It had been replaced by excitement. Maya was walking across the schoolyard when someone behind her sneezed loudly and deliberately theatrically.

"Oh, sorry!" shouted a boy from a parallel class. "I'm allergic to space dust!"

The group of teenagers around him burst out laughing. It wasn't the malicious, aggressive laughter of a fight. It was light, unifying laughter. They were having fun. They felt witty.

Maya didn't turn around. She just adjusted the strap of her backpack and quickened her pace. But I saw her shoulders slump. She understood: she was no longer a threat. She was a clown. And no one feels sorry for a clown.

In the evening, I asked Katya to show me the school chat. She reluctantly handed me her phone.

"Just don't start lecturing me about morality, okay? These are just memes." I scrolled through the feed and felt my fingers grow cold. It was creativity. Real, sparkling folk art. Here was a photo of Maya sitting in the cafeteria over a plate of buckwheat. Using a simple photo editor, someone had drawn an antenna on her head. The caption read: *"Signal reception from Alpha Centauri. Buckwheat download 40% complete*." Likes, emojis, comments: "Careful, don't mess up the settings!" "Where's the foil hat?"

Here's a short video. Maya's father gets out of his car near the school. An ordinary man in jeans and a sweater. But the video is slowed down, with sound from The X-Files superimposed, and a

filter over his face that makes his eyes huge and black, like an alien's. Caption: *"The guru has arrived for biomaterial*."

I watched it and realized that a terrible substitution was taking place. The fear of the "cult" that the adults were trying to instill had turned into contempt. And contempt is armor that cannot be pierced by sympathy. If Maya had been beaten, someone might have stood up for her. Violence causes rejection in a normal person. But there was no violence here. Here it was a "joke." And anyone who doesn't understand jokes is a bore and a stuffy person.

"Is it funny?" I asked, returning the phone.

"Come on, Mom, it's really funny," Katya shrugged. "Look at her face. She's always so serious, like she's saving the world. So the guys are just teasing her."

"Teasing." I went to my room and took a folder with printouts from the shelf. I needed to find confirmation of my thoughts. I knew it had happened before. The history of humanity is a history of repeating scenarios, and the "funny enemy" scenario was one of the bloodiest.

I found some materials about Nazi Germany. We are used to thinking about the Third Reich through the prism of black-and-white chronicles of marching soldiers and the horrors of concentration camps. But before the ovens started working, the printing presses started working. And they didn't just print orders. They printed cartoons. In 1938, a children's book was published in Germany. It was called "The Poisonous Mushroom" (*Der Giftpilz*). It was not an underground pamphlet, but a colorful publication that was read to children at bedtime and discussed in schools. I found scans of the

pages. Bright, almost Disney-like pictures. Here, a mushroom picker in the forest explains to a boy that there are good mushrooms and there are poisonous ones. And so it is among people: there are good Germans and there are Jews. The Jews in the pictures were not depicted as scary monsters with knives. No, they were depicted *as funny*. Fat, with crooked noses, making ridiculous gestures. They were greedy, stupid, disgusting, but at the same time caricatured.

Next to it lay a printout of another book from the same period, Poodle-Mops-Dachshund-Pinscher. A book for teenagers. In it, Jews were compared to animals. Not to wolves or tigers (that would have given the enemy nobility or strength), but to parasites. To hyenas, bedbugs, locusts. The author, Ernst Himer, and the illustrator, Philipp Ruprecht, knew what they were doing. If you portray the enemy as strong, he will inspire fear and respect. If you portray him as ridiculous and pathetic, he will inspire disgust. Killing a person is difficult. Killing a bedbug is a hygienic necessity.

I looked at a cartoon from the 1936 newspaper *Der Stürmer*. A Jew with a huge mouth is trying to swallow the globe. It was grotesque, absurd. People laughed at it in beer halls. "Look, Hans, how accurate!" The laughter in the beer hall in 1936 and the laughter in the schoolyard in 2024 were of the same nature. It was laughter of liberation from morality. When you laugh at someone, you put yourself above them. You are the subject, the observer, the normal person. The one being laughed at is the object. A thing. A meme. Dehumanization does not begin with a blow from a rifle butt. It begins with caricature.

I shifted my gaze to another stack of papers. Rwanda, 1994. There was no internet or Photoshop. There was radio. "Free Radio and Television of a Thousand Hills" (RTLM). The radio hosts were stars. They were cheerful, charismatic guys. They played trendy music, joked around, and greeted listeners. And between songs, with the same light, cheerful tone, they called the Tutsis "cockroaches" (*inyenzi*). Not "enemies." Not "invaders." Cockroaches. I found the memoirs of a survivor, Jacqueline Murekataba. She was nine years old. The same age as my Katya was just recently. She said: "*They said that the Tutsis were cockroaches, that the Tutsis were snakes. I didn't understand how it was possible to turn from a human being into a cockroach in just a few days...*"

The word "cockroach" worked in the same way as the meme about "cosmic connection." It deprived the victim of their human form. A cockroach has no name. A cockroach has no family, no favorite toy, no dreams. A cockroach simply exists to interfere with our lives. And when the time came to kill, the people who had listened to the cheerful radio station did not go to kill their neighbors. They went to "clean up" the country. They did the work of exterminators.

My thoughts returned to the present. Of course, comparing school bullying to genocide seems like an exaggeration. No one is calling for Maya to be killed. But the mechanism is the same. Absolutely the same. Psychologists call this "lowering the threshold of empathy." Satire, irony, sarcasm - these are tools that allow you to turn off empathy. When people write "Beware, infected zone!" in a

chat and add laughing emojis, it works on the subconscious. Maya is contagious. Maya is not like us. Maya is ridiculous in her absurdity.

I remembered an article about Dvorkin's methods. He, too, rarely speaks seriously. His style is caustic, vicious irony. He comes up with offensive nicknames. He uses terms that sound like diagnoses but are actually just insults packaged in a pseudo-scientific wrapper. "Psychocults." "Sectarians." He creates an image of an enemy who is both dangerous (wants power over the world) and pathetic (a brainwashed slave). This is a classic propaganda technique: the enemy must be scary enough to be hated and weak enough to be despised.

The parent chat also started to get busy. While the kids were practicing their wit, the adults were practicing their "common sense," which turned out to be the same kind of snarkiness. *"I saw this girl's mom today,*" wrote one of the parents. *"She was dressed all in black, eyes downcast. Probably cleansing her karma on the go."* Emoji: hand-face. *"Yeah, they have their own atmosphere there. The main thing is that they don't spread it,*" replied the father, who always talked about the importance of patriotic education at meetings. *"And I heard that they don't eat meat because meat contains the souls of slaughtered animals. Can you imagine? You eat a cutlet and destroy a soul!"* A string of emojis laughing until they cried.

I read it and understood: they enjoyed it. They physically enjoyed writing it. It united them. They felt like normal, sane people who ate cutlets, watched TV, and didn't believe in nonsense. Mocking the "sectarians" became the social glue for our class. They didn't see Maya's parents as people who had built a business, paid taxes, and loved their daughter. They saw a caricature from a satiric magazine

or, worse, from *Der Stürmer*. The image of a "greedy sectarian" who wants to take away their apartment was mixed with the image of a "crazy esoteric" who is afraid of cutlets. The result was an ugly, ridiculous hybrid.

I tried to imagine how Maya feels when she walks into the classroom. She sees those looks. She hears that laughter. She knows that new pictures are being created on the phones pointed at her. She is in a glass jar. We are all outside, watching, pointing fingers, and laughing. And she is inside, and there is less and less air.

The scariest thing about ridicule is that there is no defense against it. If you are accused of a crime, you can provide an alibi. You can hire a lawyer. You can prove with facts that you are not guilty. But how can you prove that you are not ridiculous? Any attempt by Maya to defend herself, any word she utters, will be used as a new reason to laugh. If she says, "Stop it," they will respond, "Oh, we have a nervous breakdown here, the aura has darkened." If she cries, they will say, "Does the guru not allow emotions?" If she complains to the teacher, they will say, "The sectarian is snitching."

It's a trap. A perfect, hopeless trap. I remembered the term "social death." It's when a person is physically alive, walking, breathing, but to society, they are already dead. They are not treated as an equal. No one shakes their hand. They are avoided like a pile of trash. Or, as in our case, they are poked with a stick to see how they twitch in a funny way.

In the evening, Katya was sitting on the couch watching some video. I heard a familiar voice. It was a popular blogger who reviewed "freaks."

"...and these guys really believe that if you breathe with your uterus, a stream of money will open up!" the guy on the screen said, gesturing wildly. "No, imagine that! Breathe! With your uterus!"

Katya laughed.

"Mom, come see, it's about people like Maya's parents!" I walked over. The screen flashed clips from some seminars, phrases taken out of context, funny sound effects. It was a conveyor belt of ridicule. Professional, high-quality content. Millions of views. Thousands of comments. *"Put them all in the loony bin." "Biological waste." "Burn the witches, ahaha."*

I looked at my daughter. She wasn't evil. She didn't want to burn anyone. She was just consuming content. For her, it was entertainment. But I knew that this was how the ground was being prepared. In Rwanda, too, it started with jokes. In Germany, too, it started with cartoons. Laughter removes the taboo on aggression. If a person is funny, they are not dangerous. And if they are not dangerous, but at the same time "harmful" (like a cockroach or a weed), then eliminating them is not perceived as murder. It's just cleaning up.

"Katya," I said quietly. "Don't you think that's cruel?" She pressed pause. She looked at me with sincere incomprehension.

"Mom, what are you talking about? It's just a joke. Nobody's hurting them."

"Not yet," I said.

"Oh, come on, don't exaggerate. You always complicate everything. It's just the internet. Everyone makes fun of everyone

else here."

She pressed play again. The room filled with the blogger's cheerful voice and laughter in the background. I walked over to the window. It was dark outside. The windows in the house across the street were lit. People lived there too, they were also on the internet, they were also laughing. I suddenly realized that we had lost this stage. The "Word" stage was over. The "Label" stage had taken hold. Now we were in the "Mockery" stage. And this stage is the most insidious. Because it looks harmless. So what if it's a meme? So what if it's a nickname? But right now, accompanied by this giggling, Maya was ceasing to be a person. She was turning into a symbol. A target.

I remembered a photo from the Holocaust archives. A group of German girls, beautiful, smiling, eating ice cream. And in the background, blurred, a column of people with patches is being led away. The girls don't look at them. They are having fun. They have a good life. Those walking behind are not part of their world. They are the background. My daughter was like that girl with the ice cream. She wasn't a guard. She was just a spectator watching a funny show.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. Another message in the parent chat. I took it out. The class president's mother had sent a picture. It wasn't a photo of Maya. It was a "safety instruction." On a yellow background, styled to look like a radiation hazard sign, there was a little man in the lotus position, crossed out with a thick red line. And the text: *"Sect-free zone. Protect your children from the mental virus!"* Below was a note from the mother herself: *"Maybe we should print it out and hang it in the classroom? Just kidding, of course. But so they remember."*

"As a joke, of course." I looked at this yellow sign. Yellow. The color of danger. The color of the star that was sewn onto clothing to distinguish, separate, mark. History does not repeat itself literally. No one will force Maya to sew a star onto her jacket. Why? We live in the digital age. The star is already sewn on. It hangs in the cloud, in every smartphone, in every head. And it's not made of cloth. It's made of pixels and laughter. But that doesn't make it any less heavy.

I didn't respond in the chat. I realized that any words now would sound like a violation of the rules of the game. A game that the whole class and all the parents enjoy playing. A game called "Bullying with a smile." I put my phone on the table, screen down. It seemed to me that it was emitting a faint, barely perceptible smell. The smell of sulfur. Or maybe the smell of the printing ink from that very children's book about poisonous mushrooms.

Chapter 4: The Expert

The parent-teacher conference did not begin with the usual discussion of fundraising for curtains or the upcoming graduation. There was something heavy and electric in the air, reminiscent of the atmosphere before a thunderstorm, when the sky has already darkened but the first clap of thunder has not yet sounded. On the teacher's desk, next to the class register, lay a stack of brochures. The paper was cheap, grayish, but the headline, printed in bold type, screamed: "Caution: The Spiritual Safety of Your Children."

I sat at the back of the classroom, feeling like a spy in enemy territory. After the jokes and memes died down in the school chat, a phase began that I would call "searching for a foundation." Laughing at "sectarians" is fun, but scary. Laughter is a reaction to absurdity, but to move on to action — to exclusion, to expulsion — you need seriousness. You need a basis. You need a document with a seal. It is human nature to seek justification for one's cruelty. No one wants to think of themselves as "bullying a girl because she is different." It is uncomfortable. It's much more pleasant to think, "I'm protecting society from a dangerous contagion." But to think that way, you need someone authoritative to confirm: yes, it is a contagion. Yes, you are right. Yes, your hatred is actually civic vigilance.

The homeroom teacher, a woman with a tired face and a permanent bun on her head, tapped her pen on the table.

"Dear parents," she began, her voice trembling. "We are all concerned about the situation in the classroom. You know who I'm

talking about. We cannot ignore the signs. Therefore, the school administration has invited a specialist to explain to us what we are dealing with. Unfortunately, he was unable to come himself, but he sent us methodological materials developed by the country's leading experts.

She took the brochure as if it were a sacred relic or, conversely, a dangerous reagent.

"It says here," she put on her glasses, "that we are dealing with a destructive cult. And the most frightening thing is that it is a totalitarian sect."

The phrase "totalitarian sect" sounded like a gunshot in the silence of the classroom. I saw the parents straighten their backs. I saw them nod their heads. That was it. What they had been waiting for. Not just "strange yogis," but a "totalitarian sect." It sounded scientific. It sounded legal. None of those present knew that there was no such term in any law of the Russian Federation. No one knew that it was a linguistic phantom. For them, it became a fact because it was printed on paper and spoken by the teacher.

I took the brochure. The text was colorful, with an abundance of exclamation marks and references to a certain "Center for Religious Studies." The surname that appeared in every paragraph was already familiar to me from my research at home. Dvorkin. But now I saw more than just a surname. I saw how the mechanism of legitimizing violence through the figure of the "Expert" worked.

When I got home, I couldn't calm down. The brochure burned my hands. I spread my printouts on the kitchen table, opened my laptop, and began to dive into a rabbit hole that turned out to be

much deeper than I could have imagined. We are used to trusting the word "expert." In our minds, this is a person who has spent years studying a subject, defended a dissertation, and written monographs recognized by the scientific community. A ballistics expert knows everything about the trajectory of a bullet. A biology expert knows everything about the structure of a cell. But in the twilight zone where Maya's family found themselves, there were different laws.

I came across a phrase attributed to Alexander Dvorkin himself that perfectly described what was happening: *"An expert is not someone who knows something, but someone who is asked*." Think about the cynicism of that. Knowledge is not important. What matters is status. What matters is access to the microphone. What matters is that you are the one asked by the investigator, journalist, or frightened school principal.

I began to study the structure behind these brochures. RACIRS is the Russian Association of Centers for the Study of Religions and Sects. It sounds respectable, almost like the Academy of Sciences. But the more I read, the clearer it became that this was not a scientific institute, but a closed order. It was a closed ecosystem. They wrote articles themselves, referenced those articles themselves, held conferences themselves, and acted as experts at those conferences themselves. It was a perpetual motion machine for producing "facts" out of thin air.

In the article "Expertise as a Tool of Terror," I found a detailed analysis of how it works. The mechanism was simple and terrifying. First, information noise is created. The term "sect" is thrown into the media in relation to a certain group. Then, when it comes to court or administrative pressure, the investigator or judge needs "special

knowledge." Who do they turn to? Religious scholars from the Academy of Sciences? Sociologists from Moscow State University? No. They turn to those who shout loudest about the danger. To "cult experts."

And this is where the substitution takes place. Instead of scientific analysis, the court receives an ideological manifesto. I read about how in 2009 Dvorkin headed the Expert Council under the Ministry of Justice. A man without a relevant higher education (his degree in medieval history, obtained in the United States, has nothing to do with modern sociology of religion or psychology) became the country's chief filter. It was from this moment, as researchers note, that a wave of fabricated expert reports began. It became a conveyor belt.

I found a story that made me shudder. It was not an abstract analysis, but a real human tragedy that happened to a woman named Elena Bressem. Her story was like a horror movie, where the villain is not a maniac with a chainsaw, but an ex-husband in collusion with "experts." The husband kidnapped the child. Unfortunately, this is a common situation in divorces. But to justify his actions and deprive the mother of her rights, he used a "nuclear weapon" — an accusation of sectarianism. Elena worked for Herbalife. You can have different opinions about network marketing, but to call it a religious sect is to stretch the concept to the point of absurdity. However, her husband and his lawyer (who, as it turned out, was connected to Dvorkin) needed to play this card.

So what did they do? They ordered an "expert opinion." Two volumes of materials were submitted to the court. A "scientific work" with blue seals from the Orthodox St. Tikhon's Humanitarian

University. The conclusion was unequivocal: Herbalife is a totalitarian sect, Elena is a follower, and therefore insane and dangerous to her child. The most frightening thing about this story was that Dvorkin appeared in court in person. As a witness. Elena recalled: *"I saw him for the first time in my life. How could this stranger know anything about me?"* But he didn't need to know her. He didn't need to conduct a psychological examination, talk to her, or observe her relationship with her son. It was enough for him to label her. "Sectarian." And the court believed him. Because standing before the court was a "professor," a "chairman of the council," an "expert." And standing before him was just a crying mother who had already been stripped of the presumption of normality.

I imagined Maya's mother in Elena's place. Here she is, a beautiful, confident woman, the owner of a yoga club. What stops any ill-wisher — a competitor, an offended client, or just a local madman — to order the same "expertise"? Nothing. Practically nothing, since the market for non-governmental expert services in this area is poorly regulated. If there is demand, there will be supply. I found information about fly-by-night companies that churn out such conclusions. The "Center for Cultural Studies," consisting of one director and a stamp. Anything can be written. That yoga is Satanism. That vegetarianism is a destructive practice. That chanting mantras is a form of psychological manipulation that destroys the psyche.

Why aren't they being prosecuted? This question tormented me. After all, it's a lie. Slander. The answer was found in a legal analysis of Article 307 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation. "Knowingly false expert opinion." The key word is "knowingly." To

convict an expert, you have to prove that they *knew* the truth but deliberately lied. And in the humanities, in the realm of ideas and beliefs, you can always say, "This is my scientific opinion. This is how I see it. I belong to a particular scientific school." "I did not lie, I was sincerely mistaken." Or even more cynically: "This is an evaluative judgment."

The system is structured in such a way that the "expert" is practically invulnerable. He can ruin a person's life, destroy a family, bring criminal charges, and then, if suddenly (which is extremely rare) his expertise is found to be invalid, he will simply shrug his shoulders. "Well, science is very complicated." It's the perfect crime. Murder without fingerprints. Murder by a word certified with a seal.

I read about the 2011 "Tomsk trial." It was like theater of the absurd. The prosecution tried to declare the book Bhagavad-gita as extremist. An ancient text, sacred to millions of people. On what basis? On the basis of an expert opinion conducted by... professors at Tomsk University who had no connection to Indology. People from Dvorkin's organization — Maxim Stepanenko, Roman Silantyev, and others — played a key role in initiating the trial. They looked for extremism in Krishna's words. And they "found" it. Because the task was not to study the text, but to confirm a predetermined framework.

I glanced at the clock. It was already past midnight. Katya was asleep in the next room. And I was thinking about how easily we, ordinary people, fall into the trap of authority. Psychologist Robert Cialdini called it a rule: "If an expert said it, then it must be true." We save our mental energy. We don't want to get bogged down in details. It's easier for us to trust someone in a suit and with a title. Milgram's experiment proved this back in the last century. Ordinary, normal

people are willing to electrocute another person (although it was just pretend, they believed it was real) if a person in a white coat says, "Continue, it is necessary for the experiment." 65% of people reached a lethal dose. Because the "expert" took responsibility. "I'm just following instructions."

The parents in our class did the same thing. They pressed the button. They reinforced Maya's isolation, they wrote complaints, they demanded "action." But they didn't feel like villains. They had an indulgence. The brochure on the teacher's desk. The words of the "expert." "We were told it was a totalitarian cult. We're just protecting the children." The figure of the expert removes the moral prohibition on violence. If the victim is dehumanized in a scientific manner, then pity for them is a sign of weakness and incompetence.

I remembered another fact that struck me with its audacity. Dvorkin and his associates often accuse their opponents of being "brainwashed" and of having their critical thinking disabled. But who is really turning off critical thinking? Those who say, "Don't listen to them, listen only to me. They are lying, and I know the truth." Those who use the term "totalitarian sect" as a tool with which to stop any dialogue. In one of the articles, I found an analysis of how Dvorkin creates his theories. *"His activities are unlikely to be supported by a serious scientific basis... Rather, they are superficial judgments, dressed up in a bright cover and reinforced by emotional coloring that is inadequate in strength and modality*." A bright cover. Emotions. Fear. That's what I saw at the meeting today. Not facts, but emotions.

But the most frightening discovery awaited me at the end of my search. I found information about how these "experts" influence law

enforcement agencies. They don't just write books. They give lectures at the Ministry of Internal Affairs academies and FSB training centers. Imagine a young cadet or police officer. They are told that there is a secret network of enemies operating in the city. That they want to take over the world (quote *from* Dvorkin: *"Every totalitarian sect strives for world domination"*). That they turn people into zombies. And then this police officer goes out onto the street. Who does he see in the Krishnaite singing on the corner? Who does he see in the Protestant with a Bible? Who does he see in Maya's parents? He sees the enemy. His perspective is already set. They have put a lens in his head through which the world looks like a battlefield. And when the signal comes — "go" — he will not hesitate. He will act as he was taught in the "professor's" lectures.

I remembered the tragedy in Waco. There were "experts" there too. Rick Ross, a self-proclaimed deprogramming specialist, advised the FBI. He convinced the security forces that inside were not just believers, but dangerous fanatics with whom it was impossible to negotiate. The result was an assault, a fire, and dozens of deaths, including children. Expertise based on hatred always leads to bloodshed.

I closed my laptop. The silence in the apartment seemed deafening. I became afraid, not for Maya, but for all of us. We live in a world where reality is created not by facts, but by interpretations. And the right to interpret has been seized by a group of people who have built their careers and businesses on it. They have created a language that is now spoken by the state, schools, and parent chat groups. A language in which there is no word for "dissent," only

"sectarianism." A language in which there is no word for "dialogue," only "struggle."

The next morning, I saw the result of the "expert opinion." A piece of paper was hanging on the bulletin board in the school hall. It was an official appeal from a group of parents to the principal. The text was well-written, dry, using the very terms from the brochure. "*...we ask that you protect our children from psychological influence..." "...signs of a destructive cult..." "...conduct a family check..."*

There were signatures under the text. Dozens of signatures. Familiar names. Petya's mom, Olya's dad, Sergey's grandmother. People I greeted every morning. People who baked pies for school fairs. They signed this denunciation with a steady hand. They signed it with a sense of duty fulfilled. Because the "expert" had given his permission.

I stood and looked at this sheet. At the bottom, as justification, there was a reference. *"Based on materials from the Expert Council for State Religious Studies Expertise under the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation*." Thus, the opinion of one person, turned into a state seal, descended to a regular school and became a weapon in the hands of ordinary parents. I saw Maya walking by. She didn't look at the bulletin board. She looked at the floor. But I knew she felt that gaze. The gaze of the invisible but all-powerful "Expert" who had already diagnosed her and signed her sentence. At that moment, I realized that school was over for her. The zone of alienation had begun. And the barbed wire around this zone was not strung up by hooligans, but by doctors of science and loving parents.

Chapter 5: The Network

Night is the only time when you can think without distraction. Katya is asleep, the city outside the window is turning into a scattering of lights, and I am sitting in front of the monitor, like an archaeologist who started digging up a shard in the backyard and discovered the ruins of a giant city beneath it.

The brochure they brought to school lies in front of me. Cheap paper, poor layout. At first glance, it looked like an amateur job. But one detail caught my eye. At the very bottom, in small print, under the publication details of the Russian center, was a logo. A blue circle, stars, Latin letters. FECRIS. Fédération Européenne des Centres de Recherche et d'Information sur le Sectarism.

I typed the abbreviation into the search bar. I expected to see some marginal website on free hosting. But what opened up before me was a portal designed with bureaucratic rigor. Links to the Council of Europe. Photos of people in expensive suits sitting in rooms with high ceilings and European Union flags. At that moment, my understanding of what was happening turned upside down. I thought that Maya's persecution was our own local, homegrown problem. That it was the result of the ignorance of a particular teacher and the activism of a few frightened mothers who had read articles on the internet. I thought that the "experts" who wrote these manuals were a local phenomenon of the post-Soviet space.

I was wrong. The thread I pulled on did not lead to the basement of the district library, but to the offices of Europe. What was

happening in our classroom was just a tiny capillary in a huge circulatory system that had entangled the continent.

I started reading. I translated from French and English, comparing dates, names, and reports. And the more I learned, the colder I felt inside. It turned out that FECRIS — the European Federation of Centres of Research and Information on Sectarianism — was founded in Paris back in 1994. It is not a club for people with similar interests. It is an umbrella structure that unites dozens of organizations across Europe. And Russia is one of the key points on this map.

I found a list of the leadership. And then the puzzle finally came together. For many years, the vice president of this respected European organization was Alexander Dvorkin himself. The man whose brochures on "totalitarian sects" lay on the table in our school. It was not just a coincidence. It was a vertical structure. The words spoken at international symposiums in France were turned into manuals, which were sent to ministries, then to regional education departments, and ultimately became a cruel joke about "cosmic buckwheat" in my daughter's chat room.

But the most interesting thing was hidden in the details of the financing. I was used to thinking that the fight against sects was the preserve of enthusiasts or church activists. But the documents told a different story. In France, which became one of the first countries in Europe to institutionalize anti-sectarian policy, the fight against dissent was put on a state footing. I came across reports from two French organizations, UNADFI and CCMM, which later participated in the creation and development of the international network FECRIS. The figures were striking. The overwhelming majority of

their funding in different years came from state sources — through subsidies, grants, and targeted programs. In a number of reporting periods, the share of state funding exceeded ninety percent, while private donations accounted for only a small part of the budget.

Think about these figures. If an organization exists on donations, it means that it has support in society. People vote with their rubles or euros because they consider the issue important. But here, public support was equal to statistical error. A few percent. That's nothing. This meant that ordinary French people, like ordinary Russians, generally did not care how others prayed or meditated. They had no desire to engage in witch hunts. The desire came from the state. It was an artificial construct. A huge machine, fueled by taxes, created to imitate the "voice of the people."

I read about MIVILUDES, the Interministerial Mission for Vigilance Against Sectarian Aberrations. It is a French government agency that has been attached to the Prime Minister's office at various times. They have created the perfect scheme. The state allocates funds for the "fight." This money goes to a network of specialized associations (such as UNADFI and CCMM) associated with the "anti-cult" field (FECRIS itself has also been described in public statements as an organization partially subsidized by the French state). They hold conferences, write frightening reports about the "proliferation of sects," and create informational noise. And based on these reports, the state says, "Look at the threat! We need to allocate even more money and tighten the laws." It's a vicious circle. A self-perpetuating system of fear.

I found the story of Alain Vivien, former president of MILS (the predecessor of MIVILUDES). It was a classic example of how

ideology turns into a feeding trough. He spent the organization's budget on trips abroad. Huge sums were spent on purchasing luxurious buildings for anti-cult centers. In the end, he resigned after financial scandals, but his work lived on. The system was built. And it worked not only in France. It exported its methods.

There is a photo on my laptop screen. The Belgian Parliament. Respectable people in chairs. Among them was André Frederic, president of FECRIS. He is not just a public figure. He is a member of the Belgian Federal Parliament. Next to him in the photo are representatives of the international anti-cult movement and Russian "sectologists." The very ones who demand that yoga and Krishnaites be banned in Russia. They are smiling. They are partners. I looked at this photo and realized that we are dealing with a transnational corporation producing intolerance.

In one article, I found an explanation of how this works politically. The private, extremely radical ideology of a handful of people becomes part of state policy. How? Through the substitution of concepts. They don't say, "We are against freedom of conscience." That would sound crazy in democratic Europe. They say, "We protect human rights from abuse." That sounds noble. Who would oppose protection from abuse? But by "abuse" they mean any belief that does not fit their standards. And by "protection" they mean police raids, deprivation of parental rights, and information harassment.

I remember a phrase I often heard in the news: "foreign agents." We are told that sects are agents of the West who want to destroy our spiritual bonds. But here's the paradox. Russian anti-sect activists, who shout loudest about patriotism, travel to Brussels and Paris. They are given a platform in the European Parliament. They hug

Western politicians. They are part of the same network. And their rhetoric is surprisingly similar. European anti-cultists shout: "Cults are the Trojan horse of the United States in Europe!" Russian anti-cultists shout: "Sects are the US's weapon against Russia!" Our Chinese comrades from the China Anti-Cult Association (partners of FECRIS) echo: "Evil cults are a tool of American imperialism!"

They are all fighting the same imaginary enemy. And they all use the same methods. I found information about how FECRIS cooperates with China. While the whole world was horrified by the repression of Uyghurs and Falun Gong followers (who, according to human rights activists, were accused of forced organ harvesting), FECRIS representatives traveled to Beijing for symposiums. They nodded their heads when Chinese officials talked about "re-education." They legitimized violence with their European status. If a European expert sits on the presidium in Beijing, then what China is doing is not barbaric, but a "struggle for spiritual security."

I felt physically sick. I imagined Maya. A little girl with an avocado keychain. It wasn't just Maria Ivanovna, her teacher, who was working against her now. A machine that justified concentration camps in China was working against her. A machine that cut budgets in France. A machine that wrote laws in Europe. This machine was greased with lies and money. And it was absolutely ruthless because it had no face.

I found another interesting fact that showed the absurdity and, at the same time, the danger of this structure. Despite the grandiose names, grants, and subsidies, the actual number of members in these organizations was laughable. FECRIS Secretary General Mireille Degen is a pensioner and former teacher. The headquarters of the

Belgian branch was located... in the living room of her apartment. The treasurer of the Marseille branch, Didier Pashou, is a tram driver. The office was in his guest room. It was like a theater set. The facade of a palace, behind which was emptiness and a couple of stools. "Fiction, a half-empty shell," is what investigators called it.

But this "shell" had status with the Council of Europe. This "shell" influenced the fates of millions of people. How is this possible? The answer was simple: "An expert is not someone who knows something, but someone who is asked." It is convenient for politicians to have pocket experts at their disposal. If you need to pass an unpopular law, restrict freedoms, or tighten control, you can always call in an anti-cult "specialist." He will pull the necessary reference from his briefcase, tell a horror story about "zombification," and the job is done. It's a symbiosis.

I looked at the diagram of connections that one of the journalists posted online. The arrows stretched from Moscow to Paris, from Paris to Beijing, and from there to New York (to American deprogrammers like Rick Ross). It was a global network. And my daughter, without knowing it, became a node in this network. When she laughed at the meme about the "cult," she was repeating words that were not invented in our backyard. These words were translated into Russian, adapted to our realities, and thrown into the information field.

I remembered how horrified I was that the parents in the class had signed the letter. Now I understood why they did it. They felt a force behind all this. Not just the power of the school principal, but the power of the System. When they talk about "sects" on TV, when "experts" write about them in newspapers, when deputies pass laws

— ordinary people turn off their critical thinking. They think, "Well, they can't all be lying, can they? The state can't be wrong, can it?" It can. The history of the 20th century screams at us that the state can do more than just be wrong. It can be the main criminal. And the mechanisms are always the same. Create an image of the enemy. Label them. Dehumanize them.

I found an article by Italian journalists on the *Libero Credo* website. They called a spade a spade: "FECRIS — an extremist group in the heart of Europe." They wrote about how in Italy these same people, financed from France, are stirring up hysteria. How they make up news stories. How they use "fugitives" — people who are angry at their former communities — to create sensational headlines. "When there is no news to distort, they simply make it up."

I remembered the rumor about "apartment seizures" that was circulating in our chat. No one knew of a single real case. But everyone had "heard" about it. Now I knew where the wind was blowing from. It was a technique. The public rhetoric of anti-cult organizations reproduces the same "horror stories": broken families, loss of property, threats to children — and that emotion is more important than fact. Fear is a currency that can be converted into grants.

I sat in the dark, and it seemed to me that the walls of the room had moved apart. I was no longer safe in my own home. I was on a battlefield. And it wasn't a battle for Maya's soul. It was a battle for reality. Who has the right to decide what is "normal" and what is "pathological"? Now it is decided by a tram driver from Marseille or a former activist from Moscow who have received state seals.

I looked at the clock. It was three in the morning. I had to go to bed. Tomorrow was another day of school, another day of sidelong glances, another day of silence. But I knew I couldn't look at it the same way anymore. I saved all the files to my hard drive. Diagrams, funding tables, photos of smiling fighters against dissent. I didn't know what to do with it. I'm not a journalist or a politician. I can't destroy this network. But at least I can choose not to be part of it.

I opened the file with the very brochure that started it all. Now I read it differently. I didn't see concern for children. I saw markers. Here was a tracing from a French MIVILUDES report. Here was a quote from an American deprogrammer from the 1970s. Here was a pure invention of Dvorkin. It was a Frankenstein stitched together from pieces of other people's hatred.

At the end of the document was a list of "recommended reading." Among other titles, I saw a link to a website. I clicked on it. The site opened slowly. On the main page was a map of the world. Red dots marked "dangerous areas." I zoomed in on the map. Red dots covered Europe like a thick rash. They were in America, Russia, China. It was a map of their influence. And one of those red dots, invisible but real, was pulsing right here. In our neighborhood. At the school my daughter attends.

I turned off my laptop. The dark screen reflected my face. Tired, pale. I realized that school bullying was not a system failure. It was the system working successfully. Maya wasn't just "disliked" by her classmates. She had fallen victim to the global industry of exclusion. And it was impossible to stop this industry alone. But at least it was possible to see who was pulling the strings.

I got up and went to the window. The city was asleep. Somewhere out there, in the darkness, Maya was asleep. Her parents were asleep, unaware that their fate was being discussed at conferences thousands of kilometers away. That their "guilt" was determined not by their actions, but by people who had never seen them. The net had been cast. And the meshes of this net were woven from words that we so carelessly repeated.

The printout remained on the table. A photo from a conference in Riga. 2018. People in suits are standing on stage. Among them, I recognized the face of that very "expert" whose surname was shared in the parents' chat as the ultimate truth. He was smiling. He was having fun. For him, it was just a job. A successful career. Grants, trips, respect from colleagues. But for the girl from class 10B, it was a life that was falling apart more and more every day. And this knowledge made me truly afraid.

Chapter 6: Fear

After the visit of the "expert" and the appearance of the brochures, the laughter in the school corridors died down. The phase of mockery, when Maya was just a funny meme, ended suddenly, as if someone had turned off the sound. It was replaced by silence. But it was not the peaceful silence of tranquility, but the tense, vibrating silence of an ambush. People stopped joking because joking about danger is bad luck. And now, it seemed, no one doubted that Maya and her family were dangerous.

I watched this metamorphosis with the horror of a naturalist who sees harmless-looking mold suddenly begin to devour all living things around it. Parents in the chat room were no longer competing in wit. Now there was a businesslike, dry panic. "We need to check their backpacks." "My son said she was looking at him during recess. I forbade him to look back. You never know, it could be hypnosis." "What if they have weapons? Such sects always have weapons."

Weapons. That word appeared in the correspondence for the first time. No one had ever seen Maya's parents with even a pocket knife. They were vegetarians, practiced yoga, and, by all accounts, wouldn't hurt a fly. But fear doesn't need facts. Fear is an abstract artist, painting images directly over reality.

In the evening, after putting Katya to bed, I sat down at the computer again. I needed to understand where this confidence in violence came from. Why do peaceful people, neighbors, suddenly start to believe that terrorists live next to them? My search led me to

an event that took place thousands of kilometers away and thirty years before today. But the script was written in the same ink.

Waco, Texas, 1993. I vaguely remembered the name from the news when I was young. Something about fanatics, a fire, mass suicide. That was the official version that stuck in the minds of ordinary people. But when I opened the documents, reports, and independent investigations, a different picture unfolded before me.

The history of the Branch Davidian community was a perfect example of how the mechanism of hysteria works. These people lived on the Mount Carmel ranch in the tradition of the Davidians, whose settlement dates back to 1935. They were an offshoot of the Davidian movement, which grew out of the Adventist community, deeply religious, a little strange to the outside world, but absolutely peaceful. They paid taxes, traded at fairs, and repaired their neighbors' cars. No one called them a "cult." Until a certain point.

I read the article "The Crimes of Anti-Cultism: The Waco Case" and felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. The tragedy did not begin with gunshots. It began with words. A few years before the assault, clouds began to gather around the community. And the conductor of this storm was a man named Rick Alan Ross. I had already come across this name in the diagrams of the international anti-cult network. An American "deprogrammer," a self-proclaimed expert, a man with no relevant education but with enormous ambitions and a criminal record in his youth (including attempted burglary) and subsequent high-profile conflicts surrounding "violent deprogramming." He was directly involved in the demonization campaign.

The mechanism was simple and terrifying in its effectiveness. First, it was fed to the media. The *Waco Tribune-Herald* newspaper became the mouthpiece of this war. Articles appeared one after another. In them, the Davidians were no longer referred to as believers. They were called "cultists." Their leader, David Koresh, was portrayed as a maniac, a pedophile, an armed fanatic. I looked at scans of those newspapers. The headlines screamed. They hit society's most painful points. "Child abuse." "Weapons cache."

Was there any evidence? The local county sheriff, who had known the Davidians for many years, said there were no signs of child abuse. Koresh himself invited the police to come and check everything: the children and the gun licenses (they traded them legally; it was their business). But who needs a boring sheriff when you have the colorful, charismatic "expert" Rick Ross saying, "They are monsters. They are preparing a new Jonestown. They cannot be listened to, they must be saved. Or destroyed."

I imagined how it happened. Ordinary Americans read the newspapers over their morning coffee. And with each headline, their fear grew. Fear for their children. Fear of the unknown. And this fear spread to those who had power and weapons in their hands. The FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF).

What happened next is what psychologists call a "self-fulfilling prophecy." If you keep shouting that a dog is aggressive and start beating it with a stick, sooner or later it will bare its teeth. And then you'll say, "See! I told you so! It's aggressive!" Anti-cultists convinced the feds that the Davidians were not people, but brainwashed fanatics with whom it was impossible to negotiate. That they only understood force. And instead of knocking on the door with a

warrant (as would be done with any other citizens), the ATF staged an assault. A "dynamic entry." February 28, 1993. Agents, gunfire, helicopters. The Davidians, convinced that they were being attacked by bandits (the agents, in their perception, were acting as attackers), began to defend themselves and used their weapons. And since the Davidians were shooting, it meant that the expert was right that they were terrorists.

I read reports about the 51-day siege. It was like reading chronicles of medieval torture, only with the use of high technology. The FBI, who received advice and an "outside perspective" from self-proclaimed "cult experts," including Rick Ross, refused to negotiate. Why talk to "cultists"? Ross convinced them: Koresh is manipulating you. Every word he says is a lie. Every lull is preparation for an attack. Instead of dialogue, they turned to psychological pressure. At night, they directed searchlights at the ranch. Through giant speakers, they broadcast the sounds of rabbits being killed, the screech of a drill, Tibetan mantras (how ironic!), and songs by Nancy Sinatra. They wanted to break their will. But they achieved the opposite. The people inside only became more convinced that they were right: the outside world was evil, it was Babylon coming to destroy them.

My thoughts turned to our school classroom. Of course, the scale is incomparable. We don't have tanks and sound cannons. But the psychological pattern is the same. When parents write in the chat, "It's useless to talk to them, they're zombies," they are repeating the words of Rick Ross. They deny Maya's parents the right to subjectivity. If Maya's mother comes to the meeting and tries to explain that yoga is just a sport, she will not be heard. "She's lying.

It's part of their methodology. Cult members are allowed to lie to non-believers." Any word she says will be interpreted against her. What if she remains silent? "She's hiding criminal intentions." If she speaks? "She's recruiting." If she defends herself? "She's being aggressive."

In Waco, this logic led to hell. April 19, 1993. The end. The FBI decided to end the siege. They pumped gas into the building. CS gas. An irritating tear gas: international law prohibits the use of such substances *as a method of warfare*, but allows them for law enforcement purposes — and that is how the US authorities legally justified its use. I found a description of the effects of this gas. It causes burning, suffocation, coughing, stinging eyes, panic, and severe attacks of suffocation; the risk increases dramatically in enclosed spaces and among vulnerable groups (children, the elderly). There were children in the building. Babies. The agents knew this. But apparently, the "experts" convinced them that these were not just children. They were "cult children." Or victims who needed to be "saved" at any cost, even at the cost of their lives.

Tanks broke down the walls. Gas filled the rooms. And then the fire started. The official version was that the fanatics set themselves on fire. But independent investigations and survivor testimonies suggest other scenarios. The fire could have been started by pyrotechnics used during the assault. Or by tanks knocking over kerosene lamps. But even if they set themselves on fire, who drove them to that point? Who created the conditions in which death seemed the only way out?

82 dead. 25 children. I sat in front of the screen, tears streaming down my cheeks. I couldn't control it. I am a mother myself. I

imagined how those women felt, holding their children close while tanks stood outside. They thought they lived in a free country. They thought the constitution protected them. But it turned out that the word "sect" is stronger than the constitution. It nullifies human rights. It turns people into biomass that can be gassed.

The most frightening thing was in the details. In the pathologists' reports. The bodies were so mutilated that they had to be collected piece by piece. "Bag 31B." "Bag 67-3." Sometimes one bag contained body parts from several people. Depersonalized numbers. This is what dehumanization leads to. First you call a person a "cultist," then a "threat," and in the end they become simply "object No. 31B."

And who was punished? Rick Ross? No. He continued his career as an "expert." He gave interviews and wrote books. He proudly pointed out that he "advised the FBI on the Waco case." For him, it was a line on his resume. A successful case. For 25 children, it was death by fire.

I found a quote from attorney Jack Zimmerman, who defended the surviving Davidians. He talked about the mother of one of the victims. She watched on television as a tank demolished the house where her son was. "I thought he would be safe in America," she said. There is no safety anywhere when the machine of hatred is at work.

I returned to reality. Why am I reading about Waco? How does it relate to us? Directly. The fear that is now being stirred up in our classroom is of the same nature. Parents fear for their children. It is the strongest instinct. And it is this instinct that manipulators play on. They are told, "This girl is dangerous to your children." And

parents turn into beasts. They are ready to tear apart, expel, destroy — anything to protect their offspring. They do not see Maya as a child. They see her as a virus.

I remembered a phrase from an article about Rwanda. On the radio there, the Tutsis were called "cockroaches" (*inyezi*). Why? No one feels sorry for a cockroach. A cockroach is unsanitary. A cockroach threatens the health of the home. Killing a cockroach is hygiene. In Waco, the Davidians were called "cultists." Here, the Mayans are called "sectarians." The words are different, but the essence is the same. Removing the moral prohibition on aggression.

A new message appeared in the chat. The mother of one of the boys, usually a quiet woman, wrote: *"I believe we shouldn't wait for something to happen. We need to act preemptively. If the school can't remove them, we have to make sure they leave on their own. For the safety of our children.*" "Act preemptively." It's the same logic the FBI used in 1993. A preemptive strike. They haven't done anything yet, but they could. So let's destroy them now.

I realized that we had passed the point of no return. The laughter was over. The anti-cult war had begun. And this war was waged under the banner of "protecting children." The most sacred banner, which has been used to cover up the most terrible crimes in history.

I found information about how anti-cultists use the term "family protection." They say that cults destroy families. But statistics show the opposite: it is the intervention of "deprogrammers," forced removal, and external pressure that destroy relationships. In Waco, families were physically destroyed. In other cases, they are destroyed

legally, through custody courts. And it is always done under the slogan "We are saving you."

I looked at a photo of Rick Ross. An ordinary face. Not villainous. The face of a bureaucrat or middle manager. These are the people who push the buttons. He didn't shoot the children. He just said, "They're not people."

I became afraid to go outside. It seemed to me that I could see invisible threads stretching from our house, from our school, somewhere up into the dark sky, where the puppeteers sit. They pull the strings of fear. "Fear your neighbor." "Fear the other." "Strike first."

I remembered another fact from the investigation. The CS gas that was pumped into the building was highly flammable. The agents understood the risks. But they continued to pump it in, punching holes in the walls with tanks, turning the house into a gas chamber. They didn't see people there. They saw a "problem" that needed to be "solved." Our parents are now also looking for a way to "solve the problem" in the chat. For now, they are discussing collective letters and boycotts. But what will happen tomorrow? What if one of the children pushes Maya? What if someone puts something forbidden in her backpack? What if someone spreads a rumor that she offered drugs? The ground has already been fertilized with fear. Any seed of lies will sprout instantly.

I closed the file with photos of the fire. But the smell of burning seemed to seep through the monitor. It was the smell of burnt humanity. I understood why people believe in threats. Because it's easier to believe than to think. To think is to admit that a "stranger"

might be a good person. To think is to take responsibility. And fear frees you from responsibility. "I was scared, so I hit him." It's a universal excuse.

In Waco, that excuse cost 82 people their lives. How many lives will it cost here? Not necessarily physical deaths. A broken destiny is also death. Maya still goes to school. She is still breathing. But in the collective mind of our neighborhood, she is already marked as a "target" to be eliminated.

I turned off the computer. The darkness of the room closed in on me. In the silence, I heard my sleeping daughter's breathing. I vowed to myself that I would not let her become part of this machine. But how? How do you stop an avalanche made up of the fear of thousands of people? I didn't know the answer. I knew only one thing: tomorrow morning, when I take Katya to school, I will look at the other parents differently. I will see them as potential gas chamber operators, just waiting for the command "fire," confident that they are doing a good deed.

My phone vibrated on the table. A new message had arrived in the chat. A photo. Someone had photographed Maya's father's car parked outside the store. And the caption: *"We're watching. If you see anything suspicious, write immediately. We need to know their every move."* The surveillance had begun. The hunt had entered its active phase. And fear had finally filled the space of our lives, crowding out what remained of our common sense.

Chapter 7: Alienation

The silence came suddenly, as if someone invisible had turned the volume knob down to zero. Just a week ago, the air around Maya had been buzzing with electricity: jokes, laughter, whispers, paper balls with aliens drawn on them flying at her back. It was cruel, but it was *interaction*. There was energy in it, albeit negative. Maya was the center of attention, the object, albeit a caricature.

Now she was a void.

I noticed this when I came to school to pick up Katya after her extracurricular activities. It was noon, the long break. The lobby was buzzing like a disturbed beehive: hundreds of teenagers, laughter, footsteps, music from phones. I stood by the window, waiting for my daughter, and watched this chaotic Brownian motion. And suddenly I saw her. Maya was walking through the crowd. It was like a physical experiment. A perfect sphere of alienation formed around her. No one pushed her, no one blocked her way. On the contrary. People stepped aside for her. But not out of respect, but with the disgust with which one avoids a puddle or a pile of trash. A girl from another class was running toward her friend, laughing, but when she saw Maya, she stopped abruptly, took a step to the side, and as soon as Maya passed, continued running. Two guys standing by the window fell silent mid-sentence, watched her go, and only when she disappeared around the corner did they start talking again.

Maya didn't look around. Her gaze was unfocused, directed somewhere inside or through the walls. She carried her backpack as

if it were not a school bag but a heavy cross. In this corridor, full of life, she was a ghost. She had been cut out of reality by the scissors of public opinion.

When Katya came out, I asked her about it. Carefully, trying not to sound moralizing.

"Katya, why doesn't anyone talk to Maya?"

My daughter shrugged, adjusting her scarf.

"What is there to talk to her about? She's... well, you know."

"Is someone bullying her?"

"No, Mom, what are you talking about?" Katya was even indignant. "We're not savages. No one touches her. It's just... well, she's toxic. Talking to her is not worth it. The boys say that if you talk to her, you'll end up on that list too."

"What list?"

"Well, the list of weirdos."

"List." The word cut like a knife. There were no lists on paper. No one posted an order on the bulletin board saying, "It is forbidden to talk to student M." But this list was burned into the collective consciousness of the class more firmly than any ink.

In the evening, I opened my archives again. I needed to understand the nature of this silence. Why did the absence of action — simple ignorance — feel scarier than direct aggression? I found the answer in history. What was happening now in our school had an ancient and terrible name: social death. It was a mechanism honed over centuries. Before destroying a person physically, you must

destroy them socially. You must sever all ties that make them part of society. You must turn them into an island that cannot be reached.

I read an article called "The Method of Branding with Yellow Stars." We are used to thinking of the yellow Star of David as a symbol of the Nazi Holocaust, as something that belongs to the black-and-white chronicles of the 1940s. But the essence of this sign was not in a piece of cloth. The essence was in the visualization of a boundary. The star said, "This person is not like you. He is here, but he is not with us. He is outside the law. He is outside morality."

I stumbled upon a historical fact that struck me with its ordinariness. It turns out that the initiative to introduce distinctive signs often came not from the top, but from the local level. The city of Włocławek, occupied Poland. The local German administration issued an order: all Jews, regardless of age and gender, were required to wear a yellow badge on their back and chest.

This happened even before such requirements were enshrined in the form of mandatory norms at the level of the General Government (for example, by Hans Frank's decree of November 23, 1939). Such measures were often introduced in places "in advance," and part of the population, already infected with prejudice, could perceive this as a "convenient" way of segregation: to see who is who and to know in advance who can be denied entry, ignored, or not considered equal. The local population, steeped in anti-Semitism, enthusiastically supported this measure. It was convenient for them to know who not to let in line, who to push, who not to respond to when greeted.

There was no German administration or decrees in our class. But we had proactive parents in the chat who wrote: "We need to warn

the children to stay away." This was the order to introduce invisible yellow stars. And the children, those little barometers of adult moods, carried it out with frightening accuracy.

I imagined Maya entering the cafeteria. The school cafeteria is a special place. It is a place for socializing. This is where alliances are formed, secrets are discussed, and you feel like part of a tribe. The smell of baking, the clatter of forks, the hum of voices. Maya takes a tray. She walks toward the tables. And then the opposite happens. There are free seats, but as soon as she approaches the table, those sitting there suddenly remember that it's time to leave. Or they put their backpack on an empty chair: "Taken." She sits down alone. A vacuum forms around her. Life is bustling at the neighboring tables, but she sits in a capsule of silence. She eats her porridge, staring at her plate, because if she looks up, she will meet with emptiness. No one looks at her. She is invisible.

Psychologists say that for a teenager, being boycotted is torture comparable to physical pain. At this age, belonging to a group is a matter of survival. Being expelled from the pack means death. The brain interprets social isolation as a threat to life. The same stress hormones are released as when attacked by a predator. Maya lived in a state of chronic attack, even though no one was hitting her.

I found a historical parallel that goes even deeper, back to the Middle Ages. The 13th century. The Inquisition. Heretics who repented were not always burned. Sometimes they were sentenced to wear "penitential crosses." Yellow crosses sewn onto the front and back of their clothes. René Weiss's book The Yellow Cross describes it as "a vertical crossbar two spans long and a transverse bar one and a half spans long." A person with such a cross could walk the streets.

He could work. But he was a leper. In the eyes of those around them, the yellow cross was a sign of shame; the person who wore it was perceived as a scourge on society. Neighbors stopped greeting them. Merchants were reluctant to sell them food. Their former friends crossed to the other side of the street.

Maya wore such a cross. Only it was sewn from the word "sectarian." And this cross was heavier because it could not be taken off with her jacket. It had grown into her skin.

In the evening, Katya did her homework in the kitchen.

"Mom, we have a social studies project to do in pairs," she said, chewing on her pen.

"Who are you doing it with?" "With Lenka, of course."

"What about Maya? Who is Maya working with?"

Katya hesitated.

"Well... her teacher wanted to pair her with us. But we said we already had a topic. And anyway..."

"What?"

"Mom, it's uncomfortable with her. She's silent all the time. She looks at you... from under her eyelashes. It's creepy."

"Maybe she's quiet because you don't talk to her?"

"Oh, stop it. The teacher put her with the Petrovs. They weren't thrilled either, but there's nothing they can do about it. Now they sit there like they're at a funeral.

"Like at a funeral." Children choose their words with surprising accuracy, without even realizing it. They buried her alive. For them,

she no longer exists as a living, feeling person. She is an object that has been imposed on them, a "burden." I remembered a thought that appears in works about the Inquisition (including Meycock's): even after formal "forgiveness," the stigma of "heresy" was perceived as indelible. For the class, Maya was "tainted." And no amount of behavior on her part could change that. If she brought everyone candy tomorrow, they would say, "She's trying to bribe us." If she started joking around, they would say, "Nervous laughter." The label works like a distorting mirror: any action by the victim is interpreted as confirmation of her depravity.

I turned to the documents again. I came across an article that contained a thought that made me shudder. The most terrible crime is not murder. It is the indifference that makes murder possible. When Cain killed Abel, God asked him, "Where is your brother?" Cain replied, "Am I my brother's keeper?" This answer is the quintessence of what was happening now. "We don't touch her," my daughter says. "We are not her guardians." We just stepped aside. We just created a space where a person feels cold.

In Nazi Germany, the process of excluding Jews did not begin with the camps either. It began with "civil death." The Nuremberg Laws of 1935. Jews were stripped of their citizenship. They were forbidden to work as doctors, teachers, journalists. But even before the laws, there was everyday isolation. "Don't buy from Jews." "Don't play with Jewish children." I looked at a photograph from 1938. A bench in a park. On it is an inscription: "Not for Jews." This was not done to prevent Jews from sitting there. It was done so that Germans could see: there is "us," the people who can sit there. And there are "them," who must stand. This is the cultivation of arrogance. The

cultivation of a sense of superiority through the humiliation of others.

My daughter and her classmates are now learning this lesson. A lesson in superiority. They felt like the elite, the "pure," because they were not "sectarians." And this feeling was sweet. It united the class. Who are we against? Against Maya. Nothing unites a group like having a common outcast.

I found another document concerning modern Europe. A report on religious discrimination. It described a situation where a person was denied a job not because he was a bad specialist, but because his name was on the anti-cultists' "blacklist." A directive with slanderous information spread among professional circles. It's the same ghetto, only without walls. An economic ghetto. Maya's parents have already faced this. Clients left their club. Not because the yoga had gotten worse. But because no one wants to go to a "cult." Stigma is contagious. People are afraid of getting dirty. "What if someone sees me next to them? What will they think?"

The fear of social death is stronger than the fear of physical death. People are willing to endure pain, but they are not willing to endure the contempt of the pack. That is why no one in the class stood up for Maya. Not even those who may have sympathized with her deep down. Because the price of standing up for her would be to wear the yellow star themselves. To stand next to a leper is to become a leper. The system of exclusion works flawlessly because it is based on the mutual responsibility of cowardice.

I remembered a scene from a war movie I saw a long time ago. Prisoners are walking in a column. Local residents are standing on

the side of the road watching. Some throw bread, some spit. But most just watch. That look. Glassy, alienated. A look that says, "You are no longer human. You are a story that is happening to someone else." Maya saw that look every day. Thirty pairs of eyes looking right through her.

In Rwanda, too, there was a word at first. Cockroaches.

You don't talk to a cockroach. You don't try to understand its inner world. You don't invite it over. You just wait for the exterminator to come. Isolation is preparation for extermination. Society must get used to the idea that this group of people should not be here. That they are a foreign body. A splinter. And when the splinter is finally pulled out, society should feel relief, not horror.

I looked at my watch. It was late. Tomorrow was another day of school. I imagined Maya packing her bag. Putting in her notebooks, pens. Maybe that avocado keychain. She knows that tomorrow will be the same. She will come into class, say, "Good morning," and be met with silence. The teacher will call her name without looking her in the eye. During recess, everyone will take out their phones and show each other videos, huddled in groups. And she will stand by the window, pretending to be very interested in looking at the street.

This loneliness in a crowd is worse than solitary confinement. In a cell, you are alone because of the walls. Here, you are alone because people have built walls with their backs.

I thought about how we adults often tell children, "Don't fight." We teach them that violence is fists. But we don't teach them that silence can destroy. That a glance can leave scars.

The documents of the Nuremberg trials contain evidence of how German children stopped playing with their Jewish friends even before they were taken away. Today, Petya or Olya's mother says, "She's a sectarian. It's contagious. It's a mental virus." And the children believe it. They build a sanitary cordon.

I closed the file with the photo of the yellow star. Only a black background remained on the screen. I saw Maya's eyes in that blackness. The eyes of a person who is screaming but is in a soundproof room. "The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground." (Gen. 4:10) But we don't hear it. We are busy. We are building walls.

I walked over to the window. The night city was divided into squares of light. In every window, there was life. Somewhere out there, in one of those squares, a family that had become outcasts in their own city was now awake. They had committed no crime. They had not stolen or killed. They were simply *different*. And for that, society had sentenced them to the highest punishment — to non-existence while still alive.

Chapter 8: Diagnosis

The word "sectarian" smelled of medieval squares and bonfires. A sectarian is someone who has chosen the wrong path. But this week, the vocabulary changed. A new word appeared in school corridors, in teachers' correspondence, in parents' whispers. "Zombified."

It happened imperceptibly, like the change of seasons. If Maya had previously been considered "strange," now she was considered "sick." And this shift turned out to be worse than any ridicule. Sick people are not laughed at — they are isolated. They are treated. Forcibly, if necessary.

It all started when Katya came home from school with news that she presented as something self-evident.

— Maya was called to the psychologist today. During the third lesson.

"Why?" I looked up from my laptop.

"Well, Anna Sergeevna, our school psychologist, said that she has an 'alarming profile'. That she is depressed. That she may be suffering from depression due to pressure at home."

I imagined Anna Sergeevna. A young woman, a recent graduate, with bright eyes and a bunch of certificates on the wall of her office. She sincerely believes that she is helping children. She reads the manuals. The very ones that were on the teacher's desk at the last meeting. And these manuals say: if a child does not eat meat, if they

are withdrawn (and how can you not be withdrawn when no one talks to you?), if they do not participate in general entertainment — this is a symptom. A symptom of what? "Psychological abuse." "Mind control."

I realized that we had moved to a new level. The level of Diagnosis. When society cannot cope with dissent through argument, it declares dissent to be a pathology. It's an old, tried-and-true trick. If you don't agree with the majority, then there's something wrong with your head.

In the evening, I sat down to figure it out. I knew that history had examples when white coats were scarier than military uniforms. But I didn't think that these shadows of the past were so long that they would reach our time.

In a folder of materials, I found an article with a frightening title: "Psychiatry as a tool of repression and state pressure." I started reading and felt as if I had fallen into a cold, tiled hell. The USSR. The country where I was born, but whose dark side I knew only from hearsay. It turns out that in the Soviet Union there was an entire industry dedicated to turning healthy people into madmen. The logic was as ironclad as the bars on the windows: the Soviet system was the best and most just. Therefore, anyone who opposed it could not be normal. Only a madman would criticize paradise on earth.

I learned the names of the architects of this hell. Andrei Snezhnevsky and Dmitry Lunts. Academicians, respected doctors who worked at the Serbsky Institute. They were the ones who came up with a diagnosis that did not exist anywhere else in the world: "sluggish schizophrenia." It was a brilliant invention of evil. This

disease had no clear symptoms. There was no need to hear voices or see hallucinations. It was enough to have "reformist ideas," "litigiousness" (i.e., attempts to defend one's rights), or "religious delusions." Any dissident fell under this definition. Any believer. Anyone who was inconvenient.

I read the memoirs of human rights activist Alexander Podrabinek, author of the book Punitive Medicine. He described a system where the doctor became both judge and executioner. He wrote that punitive psychiatry was used as a way to deal with those who were difficult to imprison "according to the law" simply for their views and beliefs. The law requires evidence. The law requires a crime to have been committed. But psychiatry only requires a doctor's signature. "If there is a person, a diagnosis will be found."

I imagined how it happened back then. A person was summoned for a "talk." Then they were taken for examination. And from there, they never returned. They entered the world of aminazine and haloperidol, drugs that turned a living, thinking person into a vegetable, a piece of meat, drooling. A Dutch human rights activist compared Soviet psychiatric terror to Nazi euthanasia programs. He claimed that psychiatric clinics had become one of the key instruments of pressure on dissidents. It was spiritual murder. Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote that locking up free-thinking, healthy people in mental hospitals was spiritual murder, a kind of gas chamber, only even more cruel.

But that was then. In a totalitarian state. Why now, in the 21st century, am I reading about this in the context of school bullying and the "fight against sects"? Because the methods have not died out. They have simply changed their name. Today, instead of "anti-Soviet

activity," "sectarianism" has been declared the enemy. And the customers are "anti-cult organizations" like RACIRS, those who supply society with the language of fear and "expertise" that turns faith into a "threat."

I found information about how modern "experts" use the term "brainwashing." It sounds like a scientific term. But in fact, it is a metaphor coined by journalist Edward Hunter in the 1950s. There is no such concept in science. No serious psychologist would say that you can "erase" a person's personality and write a new one, like on a flash drive. But anti-cultists vitally need this term. Why? Because it deprives a person of their subjectivity. If Maya simply believes what her parents believe, that is her right. That is freedom of conscience. But if Maya has been "brainwashed," then she is a victim. She does not know what she is doing. She is a broken doll. And a broken doll needs to be repaired. Even if she screams and resists.

I understood what the school psychologist was doing. She wasn't diagnosing Maya. She was constructing her incapacity. In the report she is probably writing right now, there will be words like "decreased critical thinking," "dependence," and "signs of suggestibility." These words will become the basis for intervention by child protective services. Or the court.

I came across some recent cases that made my blood run cold. This wasn't happening in 1937. It was happening now, right next to us. July 2020. Crimea. A blind man with a first-degree disability. A Muslim. He was accused of organizing a terrorist cell. The evidence? Books by the Islamic party Hizb ut-Tahrir found in his home. The nuance was that the books were ordinary, printed books. And the man had gone blind in 2009. He was physically unable to read them.

But the system didn't need facts. It needed a diagnosis. The blind man was sent for inpatient psychiatric evaluation. Formally, it was "to resolve expert questions"; in essence, it was part of a repressive procedure in which medical examination becomes an instrument of pressure.

Another case. Spring 2023. An academician. Corresponding member of the Russian Academy of Sciences. A man who led the creation of supercomputers. The intellectual elite of the nation. He was accused of financing an extremist organization. He denied his guilt. What did the system do? It did not bother with complicated evidence of financial transactions. In November 2023, the court sent the scientist for inpatient psychiatric examination. A man whose brain is a national treasure was sent to a place where that brain could be extinguished with pills.

I saw the system at work here. Psychiatry has once again become a servant of ideology. And the most frightening thing is that the legislative basis for this has already been laid. I found the text of the amendments to the Criminal Procedure Code from December 2021. Now the court can place suspects and defendants in custody in a psychiatric hospital for up to six months. Half a year. Six months in isolation, among genuinely sick people, under the influence of drugs. It's the perfect way to eliminate someone. The person disappears. They are not in prison (where there are lawyers and human rights defenders), they are in a hospital. And in a hospital, the rules of "medical confidentiality" and "regime" apply.

Thinking back to school, I realized that our Anna Sergeevna is a small cog in this huge machine. She may not even understand what she is doing. She thinks she is saving the girl from a "destructive

influence." But her conclusion — "alarming profile," "signs of psychological abuse" — could be the first step toward a disaster. If there is a psychologist's conclusion, you can contact child protective services. If child protective services decide that the parents are "harming the child's mental health," they can go to court. And in court, "experts" from the anti-cult pool will appear and say, "Yes, this is a typical case of brainwashing. The girl needs to be removed and rehabilitated."

"Rehabilitation." Another nice word that has been turned inside out. I learned about the practice of "deprogramming." In Russia, little is said about it, but it exists. It's a business. Relatives, frightened by propaganda, pay huge sums of money to "specialists" to "cure" their loved ones of sectarianism. In essence, this is kidnapping. The person is seized, taken to a closed center (often under the guise of a religious or "rehabilitation" center) and held there by force. "Psychologists" and psychiatrists work with them. They are not allowed to sleep. They are forced to watch films about the dangers of sects. They are broken. Any resistance is interpreted as a symptom of illness. "See how aggressive he is? It's withdrawal. It's the demons coming out. We must continue."

I imagined Maya in such a center. Her parents love her. They would never send her there. But what if her parents are deprived of their rights? What if someone decides that they know better how to save a child's soul? Then Maya will end up in the hands of people who consider her faith to be an illness. And they will treat this illness as best they can — with violence disguised as therapy.

In the parents' chat, the topic of Maya's "mental health" became dominant. *"I saw her twitching her shoulder in class. It's a nervous tic. I'm telling you, they've driven the child to it." "And her eyes? Have you seen her eyes? Glassy. Like a drug addict or a zombie." "We need to write a collective request to have her examined by a psychiatrist. Not a school psychiatrist, but a real one. At a clinic."*

They craved a diagnosis. A diagnosis would be the ultimate justification for their cruelty. If she's sick, then we're right to avoid her. If she's sick, then her parents are criminals who drove her to this state. A diagnosis removes all moral questions. You don't befriend crazy people. Crazy people are isolated for their own good.

I looked at a photo of Alexander Dvorkin. He is not a doctor. He has no medical training. But it is he and his associates who decide who is healthy and who is not. They have created a parallel medicine. A medicine where diagnoses are made not on the basis of tests or clinical symptoms, but on the basis of what books you read and who you pray to. In one of the articles, I found a list of questions that are asked of psychiatric experts in such cases. "Are these beliefs capable of affecting adequacy?" "Can this person work in the civil service?" These are questions about civil death. A "yes" answer to any of them means the end of a career, the end of a normal life.

I was frightened by how easy it is to do this. There is no need to build a gulag. There is no need to revive the NKVD. It is enough to simply change the definition of normality. If someone is different, it is a pathology. And according to their logic, pathology must be eradicated.

The next day, I saw Maya outside the psychologist's office. She was sitting on a bench, her hands clasped in her lap. Anna Sergeevna was standing next to her, saying something softly and sympathetically, leaning close to her face. From the outside, it looked like concern. But I saw Maya pressing herself against the wall. She sensed the insincerity. She understood that her every word, her every gesture would be recorded and used against her family.

"You want to be happy, don't you, Maya?" the psychologist's voice reached me.

"We just want to help you figure things out. Your parents... they can be wrong. That's okay."

"Parents can be wrong." It was a wedge. The psychologist was driving a wedge between a daughter and her parents. She was destroying the most important relationship in the child's life, hiding behind professional ethics.

I walked past, lowering my eyes. I didn't intervene. What could I say? "Don't listen to her"? Then the psychologist would write in her report that I was also "under influence." That I was interfering with the specialist's work. Fear paralyzed me just as it did the others.

In the evening, I found another document. It was a letter about how the image of a "cult member" is created. "The spread of stereotypes leads to the creation of a negative image and, ultimately, to intolerance." Scientists are trying to argue. Sociologists, religious scholars, and human rights activists say, "Stop! You are using pseudoscience! There is no brainwashing!" But their voices are drowned out. Because Dvorkin's books have huge print runs. Because he is supported by television channels. Because horror

stories about "zombies" sell better than the complex truth about freedom of choice.

I looked at my daughter. Katya was on her phone, healthy, "normal." But where is the guarantee that tomorrow someone won't decide that her passion for anime or computer games is also a pathology? After all, the criteria are vague. "Escaping reality." "Changing social circles." "Specific slang." All of this can be applied to any teenager. And if tomorrow there is an order to fight gamers or anime fans, my daughter will also find herself in a psychologist's office with a diagnosis of "internet addiction" or "destructive influence of Japanese culture." And she will also be "treated."

Punitive psychiatry is not a story about dissidents wearing glasses. It is a story about how we have no protection from the arbitrariness of the "norm." Anyone who breaks ranks risks getting a yellow ticket. Only now it's not paper. It's digital. It's entered into databases. "Prone to extremism." "Psychologically unstable." "Cult victim."

I closed my laptop. It seemed to me that the screen was glowing with a poisonous, hospital light. We live in a world where health has become a privilege of the loyal. If you are loyal to the majority, you are healthy. If not, you are sent to a ward.

In my bag was a piece of paper that Katya had brought home from school. "Consent for psychological support." I had to sign it. Before, I would have done so without looking. A psychologist at school is a good thing, right? Now I looked at this form as if it were a warrant to search my soul. I picked up the pen. My hand froze. I imagined Anna Sergeevna asking my daughter with the same gentle

smile, "What does your mother say about authority? Which church do you go to? What books do you have at home?" And any answer could become a diagnosis.

I tore up the form. It was a small, meaningless act of rebellion. It wouldn't save Maya. The machine had already been set in motion. The diagnosis had already been made. Maya was a "zombie." And zombies have no rights. No one feels sorry for zombies. Zombies are subject to reprogramming.

Outside the window, an ambulance siren wailed. An alarming, mournful sound. It used to mean that someone was rushing to help. Now it seemed to me that it was a patrol of forest medics coming to take away those who did not fit into the landscape. I went to the window. The car with flashing lights rushed past, cutting through the darkness with a blue beam. Where was it going? To whom? Perhaps to a person who dared to read the wrong books? Or to someone who dared to be too smart? Or to a little girl who just wanted to do yoga but turned out to be an enemy of the state diagnosed with "dissent"?

A printout with a quote from a manual for parents remained on the table: *"If you notice changes in your child's behavior, consult a specialist immediately. Medication may be necessary."* Medication to correct the soul. Pharmacological humility. There it is, the final argument in the debate about freedom. A pill. And when the arguments run out, chemistry enters.

Chapter 9: Pressure

A sheet of paper weighs about five grams. It is light, almost weightless. If you drop it, it will float smoothly through the air, obeying the slightest breath of wind. But if that sheet has an official stamp and signature on it, its weight changes. It becomes heavier than a tombstone. It can crush a business that took years to build. It can break the backbone of a family that seemed strong. It can take a child away from their mother.

We have entered a new phase. Before Maya and her family were being killed with words — jokes, memes, boycotts — now the system has moved on to action. Words have hardened into protocols, decrees, and lawsuits. The era of Administrative Pressure has begun.

It happened on a Wednesday, in the middle of the work week. I was walking past the very club that belonged to Maya's parents. Usually at this time of day, you could see life going on inside through the large display windows: people spreading out mats, the administrator smiling behind the counter, fairy lights twinkling in the corner. It was a bright, warm spot on the map of our neighborhood. But today the windows were dark. A white A4 sheet hung on the glass door. "Closed for technical reasons." And next to the entrance stood a police car. Not with its siren on, not in pursuit mode. It stood quietly, like it owned the place, with its engine off. Two uniformed officers were smoking on the porch, lazily chatting with a man in plain clothes who was holding a thick folder.

The parents' chat, which had become a chronicle of the dive bomber for me, was already buzzing with excitement. *"Finally! I saw the inspectors go in. Firefighters and someone else." "It's about time. Who knows what they're really doing there under the guise of yoga." "My husband said they found violations in their paperwork. Something about the lease or license."*

I read these messages and realized that none of them knew the truth. They didn't need the truth. They needed confirmation that their irrational fear was justified. If the police came, it meant they were guilty. They don't come here for no reason. This axiom, ingrained in the subconscious of generations, worked flawlessly.

How exactly does the word "sect" turn into a police raid? After all, there is no article in the Criminal Code for "sectarianism." Yoga is not prohibited. Vegetarianism is not an administrative offense. How does it work?

It turns out that no special laws are needed to destroy undesirables. Old, proven methods adapted to the new ideology are sufficient. I came across an interview with a former RACIRS employee who talked about the transformation of the system. In 2011, the UBOPs — departments for combating organized crime — were abolished. These were the famous "killing departments," where tough operatives used to work, accustomed to dealing with gangsters. These people, who did not know how to work subtly, were transferred to new structures — Centers for Combating Extremism (Centers "E"). And they were faced with a problem: who to fight? Organized crime had either become legal or gone underground. The nationalists, who were initially the main target, quickly

"disappeared" — some were imprisoned, others went quiet. But reports had to be filed. The system cannot exist without an enemy.

And then people from agencies searching for enemies of the state came to the RACIRS offices. Gave them the enemies - sectarians. The operatives asked, "Where do they live? Who are their leaders?" They were given addresses. They were given lists. That's how the connection was made. The security forces got a convenient target — unarmed, peaceful people who could be labeled as extremists. And the "sectologists" got the big stick they had always dreamed of.

I imagined how this happened with Maya's parents' club. Perhaps one of the "vigilant citizens" (maybe even someone from our chat) wrote a statement. Or a competitor who liked the premises. Or maybe the local department just needed to show some vigorous activity. A call to an "expert."

"Listen, there are some yogis here. Can we pin something on them?"

"Sure. Write down: destructive cult, Eastern practices, psychological abuse. We'll give you a reference."

And the machine started spinning. The fire inspector finds that the width of a passage is five centimeters less than the norm. The sanitary inspector finds dust on the fan. The tax office freezes accounts due to "suspicious activity." This is called "making life difficult for businesses." But when the business belongs to "sectarians," it is called "protecting the spiritual safety of citizens."

I found a story that perfectly illustrated this commercial aspect of hatred. The story of the Rozhana Center and Zhanna

Tsaregradskaya. It was a successful perinatal education center. They taught women about breastfeeding . It was a profitable and popular business. But at some point, they became too visible. And, as Tsaregradskaya herself claimed, their success coincided with the entry of a major competitor into the market. What happened next? The "sectologists" entered the game. A massive information attack began. The center for helping mothers was declared a "sect." Dvorkin and his team coordinated the campaign on the internet. The result: criminal cases, arrests, prison for Zhanna's husband, and the destruction of the business. The competitor took over the market. The "cult fighters" received income and fame as saviors.

I thought about Maya's parents. They are not oligarchs. They have a small club. But the principle is the same. The label "cult" is a black mark for business. As soon as the rumor spreads, the landlord starts to get nervous. He doesn't want any trouble with the police. It's easier for him to terminate the contract. The bank, seeing negative publications or requests from the authorities, blocks accounts under 115-FZ (countering money laundering and terrorist financing). Try to prove that you are not financing terrorism when the newspaper calls you a "totalitarian sect." Suppliers refuse to ship goods. Customers, even the most loyal ones, begin to quietly disappear. No one wants their name to be in the "sectarian" database, which, according to rumors, is being compiled by the authorities.

This is economic strangulation. It happens quietly, without gunshots. It's just a matter of cutting off the oxygen. Maya's family was now losing more than just income. They were losing the ground beneath their feet. They were becoming outcasts not only socially,

but also economically. And in today's world, a person without money and without a business is a person without protection.

But the most frightening discovery was yet to come. Business is money. Money can be earned again. But there are things that cannot be returned. I stumbled upon an article with a headline that sent a chill down my spine: "RATSIRS on call, or how Dvorkin took a child away from his mother."

It was the story of Elena from Perm. A seemingly ordinary family drama. Divorce. Division of property and children. The husband, Alexander, was a wealthy and influential man. The wife, Elena, was a housewife. The husband was a despot. According to Elena herself, there was violence in the family. She left, took the children, and moved to Moscow. And then her husband hired "cult experts." Elena worked for Herbalife. Network marketing, selling dietary supplements. You can be skeptical about it, but calling it a religious cult is absurd. However, for Alexander Dvorkin and his organization RACIRS, nothing is impossible if there is a client.

I read the details, and my hair stood on end. It was a real service. "Turnkey cult studies." My husband turned to lawyer Alexander Korelov, a member of RACIRS. He contacted Dvorkin. A strategy was developed. An "expert opinion" was written specifically for the court. In it, Herbalife was declared a dangerous totalitarian sect, and Elena was declared a brainwashed follower who was dangerous to her own children. Dvorkin personally responded to the lawyer's requests. His students prepared the paperwork. Materials from their own conferences were presented to the court as "scientific evidence."

And the court believed them. Because the judge had a document signed by a person who was perceived as a "leading expert." On the other hand, there was just a woman who had been humiliated by her husband for years. The result: the mother's son was taken away from her. The boy, Kostya, 12, was secretly taken to Perm by his father. Elena had not seen him for a year. She did not know where he was. She lived in fear that her daughter would also be taken away.

I imagined myself in Elena's place. Imagine: people in uniform come to you and take your child away because some bearded man in Moscow wrote a note saying that you believe wrongly or work wrongly. And there is nothing you can do about it. Your tears are "the hysterics of a sectarian." Your attempt to protect your child is "the aggression of a fanatic." Your love is "psychological abuse."

This was a precedent. It meant that anyone with money and connections could hire RACIRS as a private inquisition. "You can hire them, they'll come, tell you what to do, cook up documents, testify in court — all for a fee." This is a quote from the investigation. A business built on destroying families.

I returned to reality, to our school chat. They weren't discussing Maya's parents' business there. They were discussing Maya. *"We need to write to child protective services. The girl looks depressed." "I heard that in families like that, they force the children to starve . They're vegans." "Exactly. And they don't let them sleep. They read prayers at night." "We have to report it. For the sake of the child."*

They used the same rhetoric as Elena Bressem's husband. "For the sake of the child." I realized that Maya's family was facing a threat worse than financial ruin. Child protective services. Juvenile

justice in the hands of ideologues is a guillotine. Anti-cult manuals state that children in sects are victims. They need to be "rescued." Rescue looks like this: removal from the family, placement in a shelter, and then transfer to "normal" relatives or a foster family. The main thing is to remove them from their environment.

I remembered an article called "One Life Out of Millions." It described the state of parents living under this sword of Damocles. "Fear for their children became the main and constant concern of parents. It was this fear that broke the unfortunate parents the most... forcing them to hold on as long as possible." Imagine that you flinch every time the doorbell rings. You check to see if there is food in the refrigerator (what if there is an inspection?). You check your child for bruises (what if they say you beat them?). You are afraid to let your child go to school because they could be taken away from class without warning.

At school, Maya became even quieter. She seemed to be trying to become invisible. She knew. I'm sure she knew what was going on. Children hear their parents' conversations in the kitchen. She knew that her father's business had closed. She knew that her mother cried at night. And she knew that the reason for all their troubles was the label that had been put on them. She felt guilty. Children always take the blame. "It's because of me. If I were normal, they wouldn't bother Dad."

I saw how the "self-fulfilling prophecy" mechanism worked. The pressure on the family was growing. Her parents became nervous and withdrawn. Perhaps they really did start to control Maya more strictly — out of fear for her. And society saw this as confirmation of its assumptions. "Look how nervous they are! They're definitely cult

members." "Look, they don't talk to anyone! They're isolating themselves." Aggression from outside generated a defensive reaction, which was interpreted as aggression from within.

I found information about how "agents" are used in such situations. The article "Expertise as a Tool of Terror" described the scheme of infiltration. "Informers." People who gain trust, gather information, and then write denunciations. Or neighbors. In Nazi Germany, the Gestapo could not have functioned without the help of the population. 80% of cases began with reports from ordinary citizens. "My neighbor listens to enemy radio." "My neighbor prays strangely."

In our case, the role of agents was played by the parents of classmates. Someone photographed Maya's father's car. Someone found out where they lived. Someone "got hold" of information about the company's debts. All this information flowed into the chat, and from there, I am sure, it went somewhere higher up. To those very people in uniform who need "sticks" in their reports.

I felt powerless. What could I do against this machine? Write a post on Facebook? It would be flooded with comments from bots and "Orthodox activists." Go out and picket? They would take me away in five minutes. Try to talk to the parents in the chat? I already tried that. It's a wall.

I understood how a person caught in the gears feels. Loneliness. You are alone against Leviathan. Leviathan has the courts, the police, television, "experts," public opinion. You only have your truth, which no one needs.

On Friday, I saw a scene that became a symbol of this stage for me. I was picking up Katya. We walked out of the school gates. Maya's father's car was parked in the parking lot. An old sedan, not the silver crossover he used to have. Apparently, he had to sell that car. Maya's father was standing by the open door. He had aged ten years in the last month. His shoulders were slumped, his hair was gray. A man approached him. Not in uniform. In a regular jacket. He didn't shout. He didn't wave his arms around. He just said something, leaning close to Maya's father's face. Quietly, insinuatingly. I saw Maya's father turn pale. I saw his hands clench into fists, then fall limply to his sides. The man patted him on the shoulder — a gesture that was more threatening than a blow — and walked away. Maya's father got into the car. He sat motionless for several minutes, staring ahead with a blank look. Then he laid his head on the steering wheel.

I didn't hear the words. But I knew what was being said. It was "friendly advice." "Leave. Sell everything for pennies and get out. Otherwise, we'll deal with your daughter seriously." It was a classic method of raiding, multiplied by ideology. They didn't need to kill them. They needed them to disappear. To "clear the territory."

In the evening, the local news channel ran a story. "In our city, the activities of a destructive organization masquerading as a sports club have been stopped." The screen flashed with footage from the operation: masked men storming into the hall, frightened visitors, scattered mats. The voiceover, alarming and accusatory, said that here they "processed consciousness," "siphoned off money," and "destroyed families." The expert witness was a man I had seen in a photo from the FECRIS conference. He spoke confidently, sprinkling

his speech with terms such as "psychocult," "recruitment," and "threat to national security."

Not a word about the fact that the trial had not yet taken place. Not a word about the presumption of innocence. The verdict was handed down on the air. For millions of viewers, Maya's parents became criminals. For their neighbors, they became enemies. For Maya, it meant the end of any hope for a normal life in this city.

I turned off the TV. The screen went dark, but the poisonous fog of lies had already filled the room. I looked at Katya. She was doing her homework, singing along to something on her headphones. She hadn't seen the report. But tomorrow at school, they would tell her. Tomorrow Maya would come to class, and they would look at her not as a funny weirdo, but as the daughter of criminals.

I went to the window. It was raining outside. Somewhere out there, in the darkness, Maya's father was probably discussing with his wife what the man in the parking lot had told him. They were counting their money. They were looking at their sleeping daughter. And they knew they had lost.

There was a printed document on my desk. It was an extract from the Unified State Register of Legal Entities. The status of Maya's father's company: "In liquidation." Date: yesterday. It wasn't just a legal status. It was an epitaph for their past life. The system had worked perfectly. Word → Label → Mockery → Alienation → Pressure. The next stage is Disappearance. But before that, there will be something else. I knew that the pressure would not stop there. Because a machine that has gained momentum cannot brake. It needs fuel. And human destinies serve as fuel.

I remembered a phrase from Dvorkin's article about the Inquisition: "In the end, the people closest to the tsar were the ones who suffered repression... History has a tendency to repeat itself." Those who are now persecuting Maya think they are safe. That they are hunters. They do not understand that in this food chain, they are simply next in line. The mechanism is well-oiled. The "experts" are ready. The denunciation forms have been printed.

But right now, at this moment, I had no time for philosophical generalizations. I was thinking about a specific girl who tomorrow morning will have to get up, put on her school uniform, and go to a place where she is hated. And I thought about her parents, who realized that the law would not protect them. Because the law is in the hands of those who know how to juggle words. And the most frightening word in their vocabulary is "care." The most despicable crimes are committed under the guise of caring for children.

I picked up my phone. I wanted to write in the chat: "People, wake up! You can see that this is raiding!" But I didn't write it. I put my phone face down. I was also part of this system. A system of silent consent. And my fear was the very oil that lubricated the gears of the machine of destruction.

Chapter 10: The Altar

I always thought that church was a place where time flowed differently. That behind thick walls smelling of incense and beeswax, worldly vanity receded, and the laws of hatred that reigned in school chat rooms and police stations lost their power. It seemed to me that the altar was humanity's last line of defense, a zone free from the state, from politics, from the malice of the day. How wrong I was.

After I saw a police car outside Maya's parents' closed club, I wanted to find some kind of support. I went into a small church not far from our house. It was quiet, candles were burning, and calm faces looked down from the icons. I just wanted to stand in silence, maybe light a candle — not for "health" or "rest in peace," but simply as a sign that I did not agree with the darkness that was happening. But my gaze fell on a table with free literature in the vestibule. Among the schedules of services and requests for donations lay a stack of leaflets. The cover showed a crossed-out silhouette of a person in the lotus position, and the headline, printed in alarming red letters, read: "Spiritual security: how to recognize the enemy."

I picked up a leaflet. The text was familiar to me. The same phrases as in Dvorkin's manuals, the same turns of phrase as in the speeches of "experts" on television. But here, under the arches of the temple, they sounded different. They sounded not like the opinion of a private individual, but like the will of Heaven. "Enemies of the faith," "spiritual intervention," "satanic practices." I realized that the church was not a refuge. It was a headquarters. And perhaps it was

here, rather than in the offices of officials, that the energy of absolute righteousness was generated, allowing our neighbors to persecute a child with a clear conscience.

When I got home, I put aside the legal documents and began to look for answers in another realm. I needed to understand how an institution that preached "love thy neighbor" had turned into a mechanism of segregation. How did it happen that people who call themselves Christians participate so enthusiastically in witch hunts? What I found made me rethink not only Maya's situation, but the entire history of the country in which I live.

We are used to thinking that the persecution of faith ended with the collapse of the USSR. That the church was revived, purified, and became independent. But the archives, which were opened in the 1990s and then closed again, told a different story. I read the materials of the Supreme Soviet commission, which included dissident priest Gleb Yakunin. He was one of those who dared to look into the "holy of holies" of Soviet state security — the archives of the 4th department of the 5th directorate of the KGB.

The documents contained no names, only nicknames: "Abbot," "Adamant," "Antonov," "Rock," "Altar." These pseudonyms did not refer to ordinary parishioners who had been forced to inform under torture. Behind them were the highest hierarchs. People who wore panagias, blessed the people, and performed sacraments.

KGB curators wrote about their charges in cassocks as effective employees. "Agent 'Abbot' showed initiative..." "Agent 'Rock' successfully completed the task..."

I was struck by information from a 1983 report. A delegation of 120 people traveled from the USSR to Vancouver for the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches. Forty-seven of them were KGB agents. Almost half. Imagine this "spiritual landing force." They went to an international forum not to discuss theology, but to promote the interests of Soviet intelligence. Their task was not to bear witness to Christ, but to push the "right" candidate for the post of General Secretary of the Council. And they did it.

I sat in front of the screen and thought: if forty years ago the church was a branch of the secret services, what has changed now? Where did these agents go after 1991? They didn't fly to Mars. They did not repent publicly (with rare exceptions, such as the translator of Aramis from the Department of External Church Relations). They remained in their positions. They continued to ordain new priests. They maintained their ties with the "office," which simply changed its name from the KGB to the FSB.

That explained everything. It explained why the fight against "sects" is waged with such military discipline. Maya's parents, with their little yoga club, did not encounter religious controversy. They encountered a system that sees any independent spirituality as a threat to national security. For a person in uniform (even if that uniform is hidden under a cassock), there is no such thing as "another path to God." There is only the "operational situation." And anyone who does not march in step destabilizes that situation.

I delved into the study of the modern structure that binds the church and the state into a single punitive knot. I had already come across the name of this structure — RATSIR. The Russian Association of Centers for the Study of Religions and Sects. I used to

think it was just a group of enthusiastic social activists. But now, comparing the facts, I saw the contours of something much more sinister. A former employee of this organization, Valery Otstavnykh, called a spade a spade in his interview with . He compared RACIRS to an internal security service (USB) within the church. It was a morality police. The Inquisition, outsourced.

The paradox was that this organization, formally a public one, had power that ministries would envy. Alexander Dvorkin, having neither a clerical rank nor a relevant academic education recognized by the Higher Attestation Commission, effectively dictated the agenda of the huge church machine. How was this possible? The answer lay in personal connections. I learned that Minister of Justice Alexander Konovalov had studied under Dvorkin. They were connected by a shared ideology and alma mater. This is how the Expert Council under the Ministry of Justice was created. The council was given the right to decide which faiths were "correct" and which were "extremist."

It was a perfect closed circle. Dvorkin writes a book in which he labels someone a sectarian. His student, the minister, creates a council and includes Dvorkin in it. The council conducts an "expert examination" based on Dvorkin's book. The court makes a decision based on the examination. The police go to shut down Maya's parents' club. And all this is done with the blessing of the church, which eliminates its competitors with the help of the state.

I found information about how, in 1994–1995, the Patriarchate signed cooperation agreements with law enforcement agencies. With the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the border guards, and even with FAPSI (the government communications

agency). Why does the church need government special communications? Why do monks need "helicopters"? The answer was cynical and simple: the church was integrated into the power structure as an ideological department. It did not need souls. It needed resources, influence, and a monopoly.

In one of the articles about the Russian Orthodox Church, I came across the economic aspect of this monopoly. AOZT "Artgemma." 1994. A church-owned company receives $6 million worth of diamonds from the state for cutting and sale. The church has turned into a giant offshore company. Duty-free imports of cigarettes, oil trading, diamonds. It was a corporation. And like any corporation, it ruthlessly destroyed its competitors. Maya's parents' yoga club did not threaten "spirituality." It threatened the market. If a person goes to yoga, they don't bring money to the candle shop. If a person seeks answers in meditation, they don't pay for a ritual at . It was a business conflict disguised as a holy war.

But that wasn't the worst part. Business is business, with its own dog-eat-dog rules. What was worse was what was happening to the souls of the believers themselves. I found the text of the "Prayer for Victory," which all churches were required to read. "...grant victory to Russian arms..." It was a document that finally severed the church's connection with the Gospel. Christ said, "Blessed are the peacemakers." The church authorities said, "Blessed are those who shoot." Priests who dared to replace the word "victory" with the word "peace" were defrocked. They were thrown out onto the street and forbidden to serve. It was a purge. The system got rid of those who retained their conscience, leaving only those who were ready to march.

I understood why parents who considered themselves Orthodox Christians so easily wished evil upon Maya in our school chat. They were allowed to. Moreover, they were told that hatred was a virtue. If the church blesses missiles, why can't it bless the persecution of one girl? After all, this is also a "small war." A war for purity of ranks.

I remembered the words of Konstantin Kharchev, chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs in the late USSR: *"We fought the church for 70 years. In particular, we made sure that the most immoral and depraved people were appointed to the most important positions. But now we want them to bring about a spiritual revival.*" This phrase sounded like a sentence. We were waiting for a revival from those who had been specially selected on the basis of their meanness. We were waiting for love from those who had been trained to write denunciations. And now these people were teaching us and our children what "good" was.

I looked at a photo of Dvorkin and his associates at a meeting with security officials. They were sitting at the same table. There, at that table, the fate of not only "sects" was being decided. The fate of civil society was being decided there. The "E" centers (for combating extremism), created on the basis of the disbanded UBOZ, needed work. There were fewer gangsters, but the staff remained. And the "sect experts" gave them work. They brought them lists. "These are the Krishnas. These are the Pentecostals. These are the yogis. Fas." And the operatives, without understanding the subtleties of theology, began to work as they knew how: breaking in, putting people face down on the floor, confiscating literature, fabricating cases.

I found a story about how representatives of RACIRS spoke to cadets of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Ryazan. They taught

future police officers that the enemy is cunning. That it disguises itself as "cultural centers," "English courses," and "healthy lifestyle clubs." They instilled a simple idea in the minds of young men with batons: anything that is not the Russian Orthodox Church is suspicious. Anything that is not understood is dangerous. And when these guys took to the streets, they saw Maya and her parents not as citizens whose rights they should protect, but as disguised saboteurs.

This was the indoctrination of the security forces. That is why, when Maya's father tried to file a complaint about the illegal checks, his statement was lost. Or he was told directly: "Don't rock the boat, or it will be worse for you." Because on the other end of the line was a man who had listened to a lecture on "spiritual security" the day before and believed that by closing the case, he was saving Russia.

I thought about how this affects faith itself. In one article, I read the words of Archpriest Dmitry Smirnov. Speaking at a conference, he openly called for violence, using language of hatred that even street hooligans would not dream of using. And no one rebuked him. On the contrary, he was applauded. The church has become a place where aggression is legalized. If you hate "liberals," "sectarians," and "Westernizers," you are a good parishioner. You are a patriot.

I recalled a historical parallel with the "German Christians" of the Third Reich. They also threw out everything "Jewish" from the Bible. They placed the swastika next to the cross. They declared Hitler the new messiah. And they also fought against "sects." Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany were among the first to be sent to concentration camps. Because they refused to say "Heil Hitler." A totalitarian system does not tolerate competition in loyalty. You must be loyal only to the Leader and the Party (or the Church, which

merged with the Party). Any other loyalty — to God, conscience, principles — is considered treason.

Maya and her family were not guilty of doing anything wrong. They were guilty of being *autonomous*. They had their own values, their own authorities, their own circle of friends. They did not depend on television and sermons. And it was this autonomy that infuriated the system the most. "How dare you be happy and peaceful without our permission?"

In the evening, I walked past the church again. The service was over, and people were coming out onto the street. I looked closely at their faces. They were ordinary, tired faces. Women in headscarves, men in jackets. Did they understand that by donating to the church, they were possibly paying for another conference where their neighbors would be declared "biowaste"? Most likely not. They simply believed. And this blind, unquestioning faith was the most terrifying resource in the hands of the manipulators.

I remembered a phrase from the Gospel: "The time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is serving God." That time has come. It came to our city not with thunder from heaven, but with the quiet rustling of papers on the table of the expert council. It came with a police report compiled on the tip-off of an "Orthodox activist." It came with the silence of priests who saw the injustice but were afraid of losing their parish.

I returned home and looked at the icon that stood on my shelf. My grandmother's old icon. I wanted to turn it to face the wall. Because I felt that those who now speak in the name of the One depicted on it have betrayed Him. They have turned His house into a

den of thieves. Into the headquarters of the secret police. Into the office of the Inquisition.

On the table lay a printed document — a list of "destructive organizations" compiled by RACIRS. There were dozens of names on this list. Yoga, psychological training, educational systems. Thousands of people. And next to each name was an invisible stamp: "Destroy." Not because they were dangerous. But because they were different. The altar of the Single Ideology demanded sacrifices. And Maya was just one of many who were laid on this stone.

Chapter 11: Violence

Violence always seems distant until it touches your shoulder. We are used to thinking that it lives in crime reports, in news from hot spots, or in scary movies that we watch with the curtains tightly drawn. We think there is an impenetrable wall between our cozy, understandable world of school chats and bloody chaos. But the last few days have shown me that there is no such wall. There is only a thin, transparent film that can be torn by one careless movement. Or by one word.

I was sitting in the kitchen, and my phone screen was glowing in the dim light. I suddenly realized that we were walking on the edge of a volcano. We were bullying a girl. We called her a "zombie." We say that her family is a tumor on the body of the neighborhood. What if someone takes these metaphors literally? What if, for some teenager whose psyche is already shaken by hormones and stress, our words become a command to "shoot"?

I began to study the phenomenon of violence in schools. Not as a parent who fears for her child, but as a researcher trying to understand the mechanics of an explosion. The term "school shooting" has become as familiar to us as the word "inflation." We are horrified, we put candles on our avatars, we demand increased security. But we never ask the main question: who is putting weapons in the hands of children? Not physical weapons. Psychological ones.

I found materials describing a mechanism that experts call the "puzzle" effect. It's a technology. Imagine that the brain is putting together a puzzle from separate pieces of information. For example, piece one: from an article in a popular public forum. Piece two: from a news story about how another shooter has become a global celebrity. His name is in all the headlines. His face is on all the screens. Piece three: from a video or comment on TikTok or in a chat group...

Separately, these fragments seem harmless. But when they come together in a teenager's mind, a short circuit occurs. A picture emerges.

I read about the news coverage the Olympics in Paris got. It would seem to be a celebration of sport. But the media space exploded with the image of a Turkish shooter who won silver. He was not praised as an athlete. He was compared to a killer. "Dad on a mission." "The vibe of a hired killer." "An ultra-chic killer from a cyberpunk movie." Millions of likes. Admiration. What does a teenager's subconscious read? Being a killer is cool. It's stylish. It brings fame. No one admired the gold medalist as much as they admired the image of a man who looked like he was there to kill. This is the very "insertion," the very virus that gets implanted in the brain.

I looked at my nephew, who often visits us. He is fifteen. He plays shooters and watches streams. He is a normal guy. But the statistics I found were blood-curdling. 63% of school shooters came from well-off families. 44% played sports and attended clubs. They weren't marginalized. They were just like our children. It's just that at some point, the number of "insetions" reached a critical mass.

I came across an analysis of the diaries of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who carried out the Columbine massacre. They did not consider themselves criminals. They considered themselves gods. "I am God," one of them wrote. Where does this feeling come from? It comes from an artificially created split personality. The media and mass culture instill in children the idea that there is the ordinary, weak, dependent you, and then there is your "inner hero," your opposite — strong, cruel, punishing. To become this hero, you have to cross the line. You have to take someone's life.

I remembered how one mother wrote about Maya in our chat: "She's contagious. We need to cleanse the class." "Cleanse." That word is a trigger. For an adult, it's a metaphor. For a teenager looking for a way to assert themselves, it can become an instruction. If Maya is a "contagion," a "zombie," a "non-human" (as the "experts" have taught us), then her elimination is not murder. It's sanitation. It's a heroic deed.

I found frightening information about how the media turns tragedies into instructions. Articles about school shootings often contain detailed descriptions: what weapons were used, how the shooter entered the school, how much time he had. "You have 12-15 minutes before the police arrive." This is not news. This is timing. This is a manual for copycats. Journalists, chasing sensationalism, are actually training the next killers. They show: this is how you can become famous. This is your path to immortality.

There haven't been any shootings in our city yet. But the atmosphere was so electric that it made my hair stand on end. I saw how the high schoolers' attitudes had changed. There was a kind of

evil glee in their eyes. They no longer discussed Maya as a funny eccentric. They discussed her as an enemy.

"Did you hear they found some kind of contraband in their club?" a guy in the locker room said loudly while I was waiting for Katya.

"Really, they're like terrorists." "We need to take them down before they blow us up," replied another. And he laughed. Laughter. That laughter again. Laughter that breaks down barriers. If you can laugh at the idea of murder, then the idea has already taken root in your mind.

I remembered an article that said that before actual shooting, there is often a surge of aggression in the region. Street fights, attacks on homeless people, cruelty to animals. It's like ripples on water. The information field is infected with violence, and the weakest, the most impressionable begin to act. Someone kicks a dog. Someone smashes a shop window. Someone brings a knife to school.

I realized that Maya was incredibly, monstrously lucky. Lucky that there wasn't that one "activated" teenager in our class who would have put the puzzle together completely. Lucky that the aggression had so far only resulted in boycotts and administrative pressure. But it was the luck of a sapper who walked through a minefield and didn't step on a detonator. That didn't make the field safe.

I have read about cases where anti-cult hysteria led to real bloodshed. The Czech Republic. A movement directed against religious minorities created such an atmosphere of hatred that people were afraid to go out on the streets. The practice of

"deprogramming" — the violent abduction of believers for "treatment" — is also a form of terror. People were grabbed, locked up, deprived of sleep and food. They were broken psychologically and physically. And all this was done under the banner of protection. "We are saving them from the cult." A maniac who kills also often thinks that he is saving the world from evil. Anti-cultists gave maniacs an ideological justification.

In the evening, I stumbled upon another aspect of this problem. Bipolar disorder. The articles said that many shooters suffered from sudden mood swings, from depression alternating with euphoria. And that this condition is often provoked by information overload. Conflicting signals. This cognitive dissonance tears the psyche apart. And then there's the "image of the enemy." There you have it, a ready-made recipe for a Molotov cocktail in a child's head.

I looked at Katya. She was sitting with her phone, scrolling through her feed. What does she see there? Maybe right now she's coming across a video glorifying yet another murderer? Or a meme mocking the victims? Or a post by an "expert" calling for the punishment of "internal enemies"? I can't control this feed. It's everywhere. It's like radiation. We think we are raising our children. But they are being raised by recommendation algorithms and information noise created by professional manipulators.

I remembered a phrase from a documentary: "School shooting is an act of terrorism." It is not just a lone wolf attack. It is the result of systematic work. Someone creates the content. Someone promotes it. Someone sets the goals. Anti-cultists who shout about "totalitarian sects" are actually marking targets with a laser pointer. "Here they are. They are dangerous. They want to take over the world."

I became afraid to go outside. Not for myself. For all of us. We live in a society where words have lost their value but gained lethal force. We throw around words like "kill," "shoot," and "destroy" in comments without thinking about the consequences. But words don't disappear. They accumulate. They create a backdrop. A backdrop against which violence becomes the norm.

I found some statistics: in countries where the media does not relish the details of shootings, where the names of killers are not mentioned, where they are not turned into stars — there is practically no school shooting. So it can be cured. So it is not inevitable. It is a man-made epidemic. And we, the parents from chat room 10B, are the carriers of this infection. When we send each other horror stories about "sectarians," we increase the level of hatred. We lower the threshold of sensitivity to violence.

Yesterday, there was an incident at school. A minor one, it would seem. One of the boys, the one who laughed the loudest at Maya, brought an air gun to school. He didn't shoot it. He just showed it to his friends during recess. "Look at this cool thing. It's like the one that guy has in the game." The teachers took it away and called his parents. The scandal was hushed up. But I saw that boy's eyes. There was no remorse in them. There was excitement. He felt cool. He had touched power. And I thought: what if he wasn't just showing off? What if he decided to "scare" Maya? The line between "scaring" and "shooting" blurs very quickly when you have the weight of metal in your hand and a jumble of grandeur and hatred in your head.

I realized that we had reached the limit. Beyond that, there would only be bloodshed. The "Roman formula" scheme works

flawlessly. Word (sectarian) → Label (enemy) → Ridicule (memes) → Alienation (boycott) → Pressure (police) → ... The next step is physical elimination.

The mechanism is the same. Only the scenery and tools change. The essence remains the same: a group of people is declared "superfluous," and society gives its silent (or loud) consent to violence against them.

I sat and thought about how fragile the human world is. We make plans, buy apartments, choose universities for our children. And somewhere nearby, a conveyor belt of death is at work. And this conveyor belt is not operated by monsters with horns. It is operated by journalists writing hype articles. Bloggers who shoot "funny" videos. "Experts" who invent enemies. And us, the ordinary people who consume this content. That night, I couldn't sleep.

In the morning, I saw Maya. She was alive. Unharmed. She was walking to school with her head down, shrinking as usual from the expected ridicule. She didn't know that a bullet had just flown past her. An invisible, mental bullet that could materialize at any moment. She was lucky. This time, the system had failed. Or maybe it just hadn't accumulated enough potential at this particular point in time yet. But the threat hadn't gone away. It hung in the air like the smell of gas before an explosion.

I looked at the school. A typical building, a fence, a security guard with a crossword puzzle. This place used to seem like a fortress of knowledge to me. Now it seemed like a testing ground. A testing ground where new weapons of mass destruction were being tested — an information virus that turned children into executioners. And we

had no antidote. Because those who were supposed to create the antidote — teachers, psychologists, priests — were themselves infected. They themselves taught children to hate those who were "wrong."

I took out my phone and deleted all the news sites from my bookmarks. It was an act of desperation. An ostrich burying its head in the sand. But I couldn't look at the headlines anymore. In each of them, I saw a sentence. Not for Maya. For all of us. Because a society that allows killing with words will sooner or later start killing with deeds. And once this process has entered the phase of violence, it is impossible to stop it. All you can do is run. Or pray that this time you'll get away with it.

My phone vibrated in my pocket. Someone in the parents' chat had sent a video. Not about Maya. Just a "joke." In the video, teenagers were beating a mannequin with a photo of some character stuck on it. They laughed, hooted, and hit it with bats. The caption under the video read: *"Training before the test."* And emojis. Emojis laughing until they cried. Parents liked it. *"Well done, boys, sport is life!"* wrote the class president's mother.

I looked at these likes and realized: they don't see. They see sports. I see a rehearsal. A mannequin today. Tomorrow — a living person. The one who will be designated the "mannequin." Maya. Or someone else. It doesn't matter who. What matters is that the skill of striking without mercy has already been formed. And it has received social approval in the form of hearts in the chat.

That was the end. Not the end of the story, but the end of the illusion. We weren't spectators in a theater. We were accomplices in

the preparation of a crime. And the only thing that separated us from tragedy was blind chance. Chance that was on Maya's side today. But tomorrow it may turn away. And then no "experts" will help us explain why our children suddenly became murderers. Although the answer was right in front of us. In the mirror. And on the smartphone screen, where we had just liked a video of violence.

Chapter 12: Disappearance

Monday morning began not with a ring, but with emptiness. It was a special, gaping emptiness behind the third desk in the middle row. Where textbooks, a pencil case with stickers, and that very avocado keychain had been lying on Friday, there was now a perfectly clean, unnaturally smooth surface. No one asked any questions. No one asked, "Where's Maya?" The class, that sensitive social organism, collectively sensed that what had to happen had happened. The foreign body had been rejected. The operation was complete.

The teacher, Maria Ivanovna, entered the classroom with the expression of someone whose toothache had finally gone away. She casually threw her journal on the table and, without looking at the empty desk, said in an even, matter-of-fact tone: "Children, Maya no longer attends our school. Her family has moved to another region. Let's begin the lesson. Today's topic is...

"Moved." What a convenient, smooth, safe word. It evokes the rustling of packing paper, the jingle of keys to a new apartment, the hustle and bustle of a housewarming. The word "move" implies a plan, a choice, a future. But I knew it was a lie. It wasn't a move. It was an escape. An evacuation. A disappearance.

The evening before, I saw it happening. By chance, on my way back from the pharmacy, I passed by their house. The windows of the second-floor apartment were dark, but there was a car in the courtyard, near the entrance. The trunk was open. Maya's father,

hunched over, was quickly and nervously throwing bags into it. Not suitcases on wheels, the kind you take on vacation or to a new life. But assorted bags, packages, bundles — everything they could grab. Her mother held Maya's hand so tightly, as if she were afraid the wind would blow her away. The girl did not cry. She looked at the dark windows of her room, where her books, toys, and posters on the walls probably remained. Her entire little universe, which she had to leave behind because it had become evidence.

They left in the night. Quietly. Without saying goodbye. That's how criminals or refugees leave. But they hadn't committed any crimes. And there was no war in our city. War had only been declared on them.

I sat in the kitchen, staring at the cooling coffee, trying to make sense of the ending of this drama. The Roman formula I had read about in historical works had come full circle. The word had been spoken. The label had been affixed. The mockery had been uttered. Alienation had created a vacuum. Pressure had broken down the defenses. And now — Disappearance. In ancient Rome, this was called *exilium* — exile. A citizen declared an enemy of society was deprived of the right to fire and water. He was not beheaded in the square. They simply created conditions incompatible with his life in the polis. And he left on his own, disappearing into barbarian lands.

Today's system is more subtle, but the principle is the same. There is no need for firing squads. There is no need for camps. It is enough to make the air around a person unbreathable. I opened the folder with the documents I had been collecting over the past few months. I needed to find confirmation of my suspicions. Could a

school psychologist and a private club really be the reason for such a panicked escape?

The answer was found in the testimony of a man who had gone through this hell. I read the transcript of an interview from the source "Prisoners of Conscience." The story was painfully similar to ours, only the names were different. The man recounted how he and his wife had decided to flee. *"The last two straws... At the Investigative Committee, my wife was hinted... that they wanted to transfer her to the accused. And possibly arrest her."* That was the first lever. The threat to the mother's freedom. But there was a second one. The one that made them drop everything and flee with a single suitcase. *"At the same time, for some reason, my daughter's school scheduled a meeting with a psychologist and a social worker. We consulted with friends and learned that this is the first step in removing a child from the family."*

I reread these lines twice. "The first step towards removal." That's what they were afraid of. Not prison. Not ruin. They were afraid that their daughter would be taken away from them. In Russia, there is an unspoken but well-established algorithm: two conversations with a social worker and a psychologist. If the specialists write a conclusion that staying in the family threatens the child's psychological health (and we remember the "alarming profile" and "zombification"), the guardianship authorities get carte blanche. *"Well, of course, if, in the opinion of the authorities, there are two extremists in the family... then the child is in danger."*

Maya's parents understood the message. Last week's visit to the school psychologist was not out of concern. It was a warning. They

were given to understand: you have a choice. Either you disappear yourselves, or we will destroy your family, grinding it up in the millstones of juvenile justice. And they chose to disappear. *"We abandoned our home, our car. Everything in the house. And with one suitcase, we came to another country to seek help."*

I imagined Maya's apartment now. Empty, quiet. Probably a half-finished cup of tea left on the table. Clothes that didn't fit in the bag in the closet. Books on the shelf that are now considered extremist literature. It was Pompeii, buried in the ashes of hatred. Life cut short mid-sentence.

The mood in the parents' chat room could be described as "restrained jubilation." No one wrote directly, "Hurray, we pushed them out." We are a cultured people. They wrote differently. *"Have you heard the news? The problem solved itself." "Well, thank God. One less mouth to feed." "I hope there will be a calm atmosphere in the class now. The children were nervous." "I feel sorry for the girl, of course, but her parents should have thought about what they were dragging their child into."*

They felt like winners. They had "protected" their space. They had restored normality. It didn't even occur to them that they had just become accomplices in ethnic cleansing. Yes, the term "ethnic" is not entirely accurate here, but the essence is the same: a group of people united to drive an "outsider" out of their territory. It was a "sanitary" operation. The class was cleansed. The school was cleansed. The neighborhood was cleansed. They could live peacefully again. They could be kind, nice people who love cats and bake pies on weekends. The dirt was gone.

I looked at these messages and felt physically sick. The scariest thing about Maya's disappearance was not that she had left. It was that the world around her hadn't changed. The sun shone just as brightly. The trams ran on schedule. The school cafeteria smelled of cinnamon buns. The "squeeze-out" system works perfectly precisely because it is silent. There are no corpses in the streets. There are no broken shop windows. Outwardly, everything looks respectable. People simply "moved." This is the highest level of skill of the repressive machine: to make violence invisible. To turn the tragedy of expulsion into an everyday episode.

I found statistics on forced migration. The numbers were dry, but behind each one was the same night, the same trunk, the same fear. Thousands of families. Jehovah's Witnesses, evangelists, followers of Eastern practices, simply dissenters. They are not fleeing hunger. They are fleeing from a label. They become "invisible refugees." The world knows about refugees from Syria. There are bombs there. Everything is clear there. But how do you explain to the world that you are fleeing from a prosperous city where cafes and theaters are open, just because your god was called "wrong" in a Ministry of Justice manual?

In that source of information, I found a phrase that explained their situation: *"We had hope... that common sense would prevail in Russia... But that did not happen. The situation worsened with each passing day, each passing hour."* This is the collapse of hope. Maya's parents believed until the very end that this was a mistake. That it could be explained, proven, negotiated. They believed in the law. But the law turned out to be not a shield, but a sword in the hands of those who decided to destroy them.

I walked past the place where their club used to be. The sign had already been taken down. There was a "For Rent" sign on the window. Inside, it was empty. Bare walls. No trace of rugs, incense, laughter. The space instantly healed the wound. In a week, a draft beer shop or a pickup point will open here. And no one will even remember that there were people here who wanted to make the world a little healthier. Memories fade faster than chalk from a blackboard.

At school, I noticed how Katya had changed. She became calmer. The tension that had hung over her for the last few weeks (to communicate or not to communicate? How to look? What to say?) disappeared. The problem of choice was gone. The object of choice had disappeared.

"Mom, do you know what Lenka said? That they left to join a sect and live in the forest," she said at dinner, serving salad.

"Katya, that's not true. They left because they weren't allowed to live here."

"Well, I don't know. They say they had debts. And anyway, they were strange. It's good that they left." "It's good that they left." My daughter, a kind, intelligent girl, pronounced her verdict. She had learned her lesson. The lesson was called: "No person, no problem." The system didn't just get rid of Maya. It reformatted the minds of those who remained. It taught them that exclusion is a normal way to resolve conflicts. That if you don't like someone or they seem strange to you, you shouldn't try to understand them, but delete them. Like a file in the trash.

I thought about how Maya must be feeling now. Where is she? Maybe they're driving somewhere on the highway, looking at the flashing kilometer posts. Maybe they've already crossed the border and are sitting in a refugee center, trying to explain to an officer in broken English why yoga has become a crime in Russia. For her, this is a trauma that will last a lifetime. She lost her home. Her friends (even if they betrayed her). Her school. Her language. She became an outcast squared. First here, now there — like a stranger, a migrant.

But for our city, this event went unnoticed. There was no public outcry. The newspapers did not write: "A family of entrepreneurs forced to flee due to persecution." Television did not film a story: "Who expelled the child from school?" On the contrary. The silence was thick, like cotton wool. And this silence was the most frightening thing of all. It meant consent. The social contract was signed: we give you the "wrong" people, and you give us peace.

I remembered the historical term "philosophical steamer." 1922. The Bolsheviks expelled the cream of the nation from the country. Berdyaev, Ilyin, Frank. Back then, it was done officially. Lenin approved the lists. Now the lists are approved by an invisible committee of "normality." And there are no steamers. There are low-cost airlines, night trains, and hitchhiking. The intellectual and spiritual resources of the country are leaking through these holes. People who could work, pay taxes, raise children, create something new — they are leaving. Those who know how to march remain. And those who know how to keep quiet.

I looked at myself in the mirror. I stayed. I am part of the silent majority. I did not throw stones. I did not write denunciations. But I did not stand in the doorway when they left. I just watched. I wrote

my notes. I gathered facts. My passivity was the very foundation on which the wall of alienation stood.

Indifference is fertile ground for crime. We fertilized this ground with our fear and laziness. And now, perfect order has grown on it.

In the evening, a message from the homeroom teacher appeared in the chat: *"Dear parents! Due to the departure of a student, a place has become available. A boy from a parallel class is being transferred. Please welcome him warmly.*" No place is sacred. The system instantly filled the gap. Maya was replaced. Like a burnt-out light bulb. Like a broken part. No tragedy. Just a personnel rotation.

I went out onto the balcony. The city was aglow with lights. A beautiful, modern city. Somewhere out there, in the labyrinth of streets, other "sector experts" are working, writing other reports, preparing other lists. Maya was not the first and not the last. The conveyor belt runs around the clock. While we slept, while we ate, while we watched TV series, someone was packing their bags. Someone was saying goodbye to their home forever.

I suddenly realized that disappearance is not the end of the story. It is the beginning of a new phase. A phase of sterility. When all "others" are removed from society, it does not become healthy. It becomes dead. Diversity is life. Uniformity is entropy. We are killing our immunity, thinking that we are fighting the virus.

On the table lay a piece of paper that Katya had brought home from school. A reading list for the summer. A normal list. Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy. But now I looked at it differently. I thought: which of these authors would pass the scrutiny of a modern expert council? Tolstoy? Excommunicated from the church, an extremist. Pushkin?

A freethinker. Dostoevsky? A convict, a state criminal. They were all "inconvenient." They would all be in the risk group now. We teach children to love the classics, who today would be hounded in school chat rooms.

I picked up a pen and wrote one word on the back of the sheet of paper. *Emptiness*. It was the only word that accurately described the state of our world after Maya's departure. We were left alone. With our "correct" thoughts, our "safe" children, our fears. We had won. But why did this victory feel so much like defeat?

In the corner of the room, behind the wardrobe, I found a small object. Katya must have brought it a long time ago and forgotten about it. It was that very keychain. An avocado with a smiling face. Maya had given it to Katya at the beginning of the year, when they were still talking. Before the Word was spoken. I held this piece of cheap plastic in my hands. It was warm. It was all that remained of a person. A small, funny souvenir. Evidence of another life that we had collectively abolished.

I clenched the keychain in my fist. Tomorrow I won't give it back to Katya. I'll hide it. As a reminder. Like a museum exhibit of a vanished civilization. A civilization where you could be different and still be yourself. This civilization was not destroyed by a meteorite. It was destroyed by our "jest."

The wind howled outside the window. A storm was brewing. Somewhere out there, in the darkness, a little girl stared at the road leading into the unknown. And we stayed here. Warm. Safe. In a prison we had built for ourselves, driving out those who held the keys to freedom.

Chapter 13: Echo

Three months passed. The schoolyard was covered with yellow leaves, then the first snow, and now it had turned into a gray mush trampled by thousands of children's feet. Time is the best eraser. It erases faces, names, and events with frightening efficiency. There was a new desk in Katya's class, and a new boy, Denis, sat behind it. He was ordinary. He ate cutlets in the cafeteria, laughed at the right jokes, and wore the right sneakers. No one remembered Maya. Her name disappeared from conversations, from chats, from memory, like a file deleted without the possibility of recovery. Life is back to normal. Parents are once again discussing New Year's gifts for teachers, field trips, and the flu epidemic. Everything is fine. But for me, normality is dead.

I walk down the streets, look at shop windows, at people in the subway, and see things I didn't see before. I see the invisible architecture of hatred. Before, it seemed to me that the story with Maya was an accident, a glitch in the system, a local outbreak of stupidity and cruelty. Now I understand: it's not a glitch. It's a function. The mechanism that ground up the yoga family and spat them out beyond the city limits hasn't gone anywhere. It's just gone into standby mode. It hums quietly, at low frequencies, like a transformer box we walk past every day without noticing the danger.

I sit in the kitchen, the very one where it all began with an innocent conversation, and go through my notes. Over these months, I have become the archivist of my own anxiety. I tried to find the

answer to the question: "Why?" Why did educated adults turn into a pack? Why did the state, called upon to protect, become an instrument of persecution? The answers I found are scarier than the silence itself.

I came across an article with a headline that would have seemed like conspiracy theory nonsense to me before: "The Fourth Reich: Who Is Continuing Hitler's Work." But now, after seeing Maya's father's eyes as he loaded his things into the car, I read this text differently. It talked about the cyclical nature of history. That Nazism is not the shape of a German helmet or the Führer's moustache. It is a virus of consciousness. And this virus mutates. In the 1930s, there was an "Apologetic Centre" in Germany. It was an organization that fought against "sects." They taught the Nazis that power is based on fear and the existence of an internal enemy. They explained that Jews are not just a people, but a "destructive cult." That Jehovah's Witnesses are agents of influence. Anti-cultism became the midwife of Nazism. And today I see the same birthmarks on the body of our society. Intolerance of difference. Monopoly on truth. The use of psychiatry as a club. We did not defeat the dragon. We simply allowed it to change its scales.

I recall the term "Roman formula," which marked the beginning of my descent into this abyss. Word → Label → Ridicule → Alienation → Pressure → Disappearance. I thought it was a metaphor. A beautiful historical parallel. But now I know: it is a manual for operating society. In ancient Rome, accusations of "impiousness" were a political tool. If a senator needed to be removed, he was accused of not worshipping the gods properly. Today, in the 21st

century, we use the same methods. Only instead of "impiety," we have "extremism" and "sectarianism." Maya went through all the stages. Perfectly, like clockwork. And the scariest thing is that no one noticed the substitution. Everyone thought it was a fight for the safety of children.

Safety. This word has become the main drug. For the sake of safety, we are ready for anything. I read about the tragedy in Waco. 1993. Texas. Then, too, it all started with concern for children. The media, pumped up with information from "experts" — anti-cultists — shouted that children were being tortured in the Branch Davidian community. The result of this "concern" was 82 dead bodies. Among them were 25 children. They were burned alive or suffocated by gas released by the "rescuers." I watched a documentary that examined this tragedy. It talked about the role of "apostates" — former members who, wanting revenge or money, told tall tales. And about the role of "experts" who convinced the FBI not to negotiate, but to storm the building. "You can't negotiate with them, they're zombies." That phrase killed more people than the plague. In our case, it didn't come to a storming. Thank God. But the logic was the same. In the parents' chat, they wrote: "It's useless to talk to them." We dehumanized them just as the FBI agents dehumanized the Davidians. We just didn't have time to light the match. They left before we could.

But the echoes of this story are not confined to the past. They resonate in the future. I read the news about the foiled terrorist attack at Taylor Swift's concert in Vienna. Just recently. Young men, almost the same age as my daughter, wanted to carry out a massacre. Where did this hatred come from? Analysts talk about radicalization

through the internet. About how they were told, "Those who listen to this music, who live this way, are enemies. They are infidels." But is the rhetoric of our "anti-cult activists" any different? Doesn't Dvorkin say that "every totalitarian cult seeks world domination"? Doesn't he paint a picture of absolute evil that must be destroyed? When you call a group of people a "cancerous tumor" (a favorite metaphor of anti-cultists), you give the surgeon permission to take up the scalpel. And anyone can become a surgeon.

I look at Katya. She is sitting with her headphones on, doing her homework. Is she safe? Physically, yes. But mentally, she is in the line of fire. The information field in which she lives is poisoned.

Yesterday I saw a story on TV. Another raid. Masked men burst into an apartment and force elderly women to lie face down on the floor. The announcer reports cheerfully: "The activities of the cell have been stopped..." I watched these images and did not see criminals. I saw mothers and grandmothers. I remembered an article. In it, the author, a descendant of Holocaust victims, writes that Nazism does not begin with camps. It begins with language. In Rwanda, the Tutsis were called "cockroaches." In Nazi Germany, Jews were called "rats." Here, believers are called "sectarians." The words are different. The essence is the same. Dehumanization. When you deprive a person of their human form, you remove the moral prohibition on violence. A cockroach can be crushed. A rat can be poisoned. A sectarian can be imprisoned or deprived of parental rights.

Speaking of rights, I learned some frightening statistics. In 2017, 40,000 decisions were made in Russia to deprive or restrict parental rights. How many of them were related to a real threat to the child's

life, and how many to the parents' "wrong" worldview? The story of Elena Bressem, whose son was taken away from her with the help of a "RACIRS expert opinion," is no exception. It is a precedent. It is a technique. If you cannot imprison a person (there is no crime), you strike at the most vulnerable. At the children. You declare raising children in the faith to be "psychological abuse." And that's it. The child is in a shelter. The parents are broken.

I think about what is happening to Maya now. They left. They became part of a huge wave of "invisible refugees." People who are fleeing not from war, but from the "care" of the state. In Europe, where they may have gone, a surprise awaits them. FECRIS is there too. They have their own Dvorkins there too. This network is global. It is like an octopus, entangling the whole world. In France, the MIVILUDES agency is funded by the state and does the same thing — witch hunting.

I realized that geography does not save you. Only awareness saves you. But where can you get it if propaganda is coming around from every corner? If the school psychologist, instead of helping, writes denunciations? If the priest in the church calls not for love, but for a "holy war" against dissent?

I am afraid. Not for myself. For all of us. We live in a society with an immune deficiency of conscience. We have lost the ability to distinguish between good and evil. We were told, "Evil are those who are not with us." And we believe it. We allow a bunch of self-proclaimed "experts" to decide who gets to live in our city and who has to flee in the night.

Yesterday, the chat was lively again. The mother of one of the students wrote: *"Did you know that the family of the new kid, Denis, came from a region with a lot of migrants? We should keep an eye on them. Who knows what kind of habits they have."* I looked at this message and my hands went cold. The mechanism hasn't stopped. It has simply recharged. Maya was a "cultist." Denis could become a "migrant" or a "stranger." The label isn't important. The principle is important. The system needs a victim. It needs to exclude someone in order to feel united. The "Roman formula" is eternal as long as we allow it to work.

I picked up my phone. My finger hovered over the keyboard. What can I do? Write an angry rebuke? They'll remove me from the chat. Go to the principal? She'll show me the instructions for "preventing extremism." I feel powerless. The same powerlessness that Germans felt in the 1930s when they saw their neighbors being taken away. "What could we have done? Those were the times." Times are never "like that." We create the times.

But there is one thing that keeps me from sinking into despair. It is memory. "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." I remember. I remember every step of this process. I saved all the screenshots, all the flyers, all the links. I wrote this book. Not to punish anyone. I don't have that power. But to bear witness. So that when, in ten years, someone asks, "How was this possible?", I can put these pages in front of them and say, "Like this. Step by step. With jokes. With silence. With consent."

I look at the avocado keychain I hid in a box. It is my little monument to the unknown soldier of the lost war for humanity. Maya lost. Her parents lost. But the war is not over. As long as I can

see this mechanism, I can resist it. At least inside myself. I can choose not to laugh at a joke that is demeaning. I can choose not to like a hateful post. I can tell my daughter, "Think for yourself. Don't believe the labels."

It's not much. It's insignificant against the state machine, against media empires, against international networks of hate. But it's all I have. Individual awareness against collective madness. The chances are slim. But "slim" is still not zero.

In the evening, Katya came up to me.

"Mom," she said uncertainly. "Denis was pushed in the locker room today. They said, 'Get out of here.'" She looked at me. In her eyes, I saw the very question I had been waiting for all these months. "It's wrong, isn't it? Just like it was with Maya?" I froze. My heart skipped a beat. She noticed. She drew the parallel. The vaccine worked. Late, at the cost of someone else's fate, but it worked.

"Yes, Katya," I said quietly. "It's the same thing. It's an echo."

"What should we do?" she asked. I looked out the window. The darkness beyond the glass seemed endless. Somewhere out there, in that darkness, troll factories were working, new manuals were being written, new raids were being prepared. But here, in the kitchen, the light was on.

"For starters, don't be silent," I said. "Tomorrow you'll go up to Denis and just say hello. Loudly. So that everyone can hear.

"What if they laugh?"

"Let them laugh. The laughter of executioners is only scary when the victim is alone. When there are two of you, laughter loses its

power."

I don't know if she'll do it. I don't know if it will save Denis. I don't know if it will stop the new round of the "Roman formula." But I know one thing: today, for the first time in a long time, I will fall asleep without feeling ashamed. Because the echoes of the past have finally met an obstacle. And maybe, if there are many such obstacles, the sound will fade away. Not immediately. Not tomorrow. But someday.

A notification pops up on my phone screen. Another news story. "A bill has been submitted to the State Duma to combat..." I don't finish reading it. I know what it will say. Another enemy. Another hunt. I put my phone down. I go to my daughter's room. We will talk. For a long time. About everything. Because the word that creates hell can only be defeated by the word that creates meaning. And this is the only battle we have no right to lose.